Hungary

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With perhaps 1,110 executions for witchcraft in a population that ranged between 3.5 million and 5.3 million from the fifteenth through the beginning of the eighteenth century, Hungary experienced quite moderate witch hunting.

The Medieval Precedents.

The legislation of the first Hungarian kings - Saint Stephen (1000-1038), Saint Ladislaus (1077-1095), and Coloman (1095-1116) - provided the first legal measures against the use of magic and/or witchcraft. These early texts referred to *maleficium* (harmful magic), *sortilegium* (sorcery), and *veneficium* (poisoning), and also used the term *striga* (witch or blood-sucking night creature). All three kings ordered that people practicing magic be brought before ecclesiastical courts. Coloman's law made an important distinction between *strigae* and *malefici* (practitioners of harmful magic). Following the tradition of the ninth-century *Canon Episcopi* and the Carolingian capitularies, it denied the existence of the former ones, and condemned the latter.

Compilations of individual cities' customs began to include punishment for magical acts during the late Middle Ages, the earliest being Dalmatian city laws in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and those of Zagreb. The customs of Buda, written between 1403 and 1439, condemned so-called *ansprecherin* (woman casting spells) and *czaubern* (sorceress), ordering them to wear a pointed ("Jewish") hat painted with angels before being burned. The synod of Esztergom (1100-1116) ordered those convicted of *maleficium* punished according to canon law; the synod of Buda (1279) threatened to excommunicate sorcerers and those using sacraments for magical purposes.

The first trials against magicians- *fytonissa* (female seer or diviner) and *incantatrix* (woman casting spells) - seem to have appeared during the thirteenth century in both ecclesiastical and secular courts (feudal and municipal), but until the sixteenth century no regular witch persecutions took place in the kingdom of Hungary (modern Croatia, Slovakia, and much of Romania).

Thirty-nine people, all of them were women, were accused of magic and witchcraft between 1213 and 1496. The earliest cases were at the bishopric of Várad (14 cases of *maleficium* and *veneficium* between 1208 and1235) and at Zagreb (6 women tried between 1360 and1379; at least one went to the stake). We know of only a dozen trials from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Hungary.

Early Modern Witch Persecution.

Witch hunting in early modern Hungary coincided with difficult times. The Ottoman Turks defeated the Hungarian army at Mohács in 1526, and occupied Buda, the capital, in 1541. For the next 150 years, Hungary was divided into three parts. The Hungarian kingdom, ruled by Habsburg kings, was limited to the northwestern part (Upper Hungary). The central and southern parts of Hungary (the area of the Great Hungarian Plain), occupied by the Turks, belonged to the Ottoman Empire, while the eastern part, Transylvania (today part of Romania) became a quasi-independent principality ruled by Hungarian noble dynasties. During the 1680s and 1690s, the Habsburg army drove the Turks out of Hungary, bringing the whole country, including Transylvania, under Habsburg rule until 1918.

Witch hunting began in sixteenth-century Hungary, intensifying during the 1580s. Legal persecutions of magic and witchcraft were reinforced; for example, in 1614 the Transylvanian Diet issued a decree punishing sorcerers and witches. However, throughout Hungary witchcraft was never considered a *crimen exceptum* (the excepted crime), and was punished together with other crimes at feudal, municipal, and county courts. After 1656,

Hungary’s most frequently used criminal procedure was based on the teachings of a German jurist, Benedict Carpzov, adapted for Austria and published in Latin at the Hungarian university of Nagyszombat (Trnava) in 1687. Reprinted (always in Latin) in 1697, 1700, 1717, 1732, and 1748, it introduced such western demonological concepts as the Sabbat and the witches' pact to Hungary. This helps explain why Hungarian witch trials reached their peak only in the second half of the seventeenth and the first half of the seventeenth centuries.

Chronology of accused Hungarian witches:

1526-1552: 17

1553-1600: 131

1601-1650: 330

1651-1700: 781

1701-1750: 2,254

1751-1800: 534.

Although Hungary has been a multiethnic country throughout its history - Upper Hungary hosted a considerable number of Germans, Slovakians, and Czechs; Transylvania Germans and Romanians; while Croatian, Serbian, Romanian, and, later, Slovakian groups lived on the Great Plain area, not to speak of Gypsies - the great majority of the accused witches seem to have been ethnically Hungarian.

Learned and popular demonology

Protestant churches, whose demonological ideas are much better known in Hungary than those of the Catholics, played a considerable part in starting witchcraft trials in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Hungary. The Transylvanian Lutheran synod of 1577 threatened with the stake anyone practicing magical acts. The earliest Hungarian treatises commenting upon witchcraft and the devil's works also came from a Lutheran preacher, Péter Bornemisza, who surveyed various northwest Hungarian peasant witch beliefs and magical

practices in his *Ördögi kísírtetekről* (*About the Temptations of the Devil*) published at Sempte (Sintava) in 1578.

Calvinist teachings on witchcraft and demonology, the best known in Hungary, began in 1562 with the *Confessio Ecclesiae Debrecinensis* (*Confession of faith for the church of Debrecen*), compiled under the direction of Péter Méliusz Juhász, the first Calvinist bishop in Hungary. A follower of Johann Brenz, Méliusz expressed a highly skeptical point of view about the reality of diabolical witchcraft. Similar skepticism penetrated the comprehensive treatise on demonology (*Disputatio theologica de lamiis veneficis--Theological dispute about the ill-willed lamiae*) compiled by two Reformed theology students, Joannes Mediomontanus and Andreas Csehi, and published in Várad (Oradea) in 1656. They surveyed international demonological literature, quoting more frequently from Johann Weyer than the Puritan William Perkins.

However, seventeenth-century Hungarian Calvinist opinions on witchcraft seem far from homogeneous. A Reformed synod held at Margita (Bihar county) in 1681 seems to have stimulated witch hunting in this region by ordering sorcerers and their clients excommunicated. Its president, Bishop Mátyás Nógrádi of Debrecen, had visited England just when Matthew Hopkins, the notorious witch finder, was active there; he included a short treatise on "*Az ördögi practicáról mint kellyen ítélni embernek*" (*How to judge devilish practices*) in his *Lelki próbakő* (*Spiritual touchstone*) of 1651. Although Nógrádi argued for rather prudent treatment of village witches, he analyzed various types of pacts with the devil carefully, taking them more seriously than his colleagues. If most Hungarian Calvinists considered the witches' pact and the Sabbat as illusions (or a product of melancholy), they condemned all forms of popular magic. In 1610, the Debrecen Calvinists published *Lex Politica Dei* (*God's public laws*), a collection of biblical texts including a long list of the Hebrew Bible's laws punishing sorcery and divination. Seventeenth-century Calvinists condemned primarily the treatment of illnesses by popular healers, emphasizing that cunning people and midwives using magical practices deserved severe punishment. As late as 1719,

Imre Pápai Páriz’s *Keskeny ut* - (*The narrow road*), published at Debrecen, reinforced this rather skeptical trend in Hungarian Calvinist opinions about diabolical witchcraft, while supporting the punishment of any form of "white" magic.

Some seventeenth-century Hungarian students upheld anti-diabolical and anti-demonological conceptions of magic in disputations at Wittenberg, the Lutheran Rome. In 1665, Georgius Fridericus Magnus, from Pozsony (Bratislava or Pressburg), defended Weyer’s propositions denying the possibility of the witches' pact; in 1692, Johannes Surmann, from Beszterce (Bistrita, Transylvania), in his *De daemonologia recentiorum auctorum falsa* (*About the false demonology of recent authors*), dared to defend Balthasar Bekker.

Unfortunately, we know too little about Hungarian Catholic opinions on the issue of witchcraft during these times. The *Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Hammer of Witches*, 1486) was known in Hungary - Miklós Zrinyi, one of the greatest seventeenth-century Hungarian poet and writer, had a copy in his library and it is explicitly mentioned during the 1691 trials at Somorja (Samorin) - but it apparently exerted little influence on witch hunting here. The criminal courts of Catholic communities regularly used Carpzov's *Praxis criminalis* or other legal guides that propagated concepts of diabolical witchcraft. Rituals of exorcism were routinely included in Catholic liturgical manuals; Franciscan and Jesuit missionaries (often Italians or Southern Slavs) performed this rite among the nobility and peasantry alike during the seventeenth century. Much like Hungarian Protestants, Catholics condemned both diabolical witchcraft and "white" magic (conceived as instigated by the devil himself) throughout the eighteenth century in printed collections of sermons (József Telek: *Tizenkét csillagú korona. Crown of twelve stars*, 1769), *exempla* (János Taxonyi: *Az emberek erkölcseinek és az Isten igazságának tüköre. Mirror for the morals of the people and the truth of God*, 1757), or manuals of *ars vivendi* (the art of living) (Ferenc Nagy: *Az egy igaz és boldogító hitnek elei. The foundations of the one and true faith that makes one happy*, 1796).

German demonology seems to have played a significant role in Hungarian witch hunting at both learned and popular levels, although its more diabolical trend is still not very well known. It was the predominantly German or Saxon towns of Upper Hungary and Transylvania that launched Hungary's first campaigns against witches in the late sixteenth century, coinciding with the demonological teachings of the Lutheran Church. Hungary's first detailed description of a Sabbat came from the area near Pozsony, at the Austrian border, in 1578. The Lutheran preacher Péter Bornemisza claimed that the witches had a queen, transformed themselves into cats, and danced and fornicated at their meetings. A much later - and this time Calvinist - Sabbat was described by Joannes C. Mediomontanus in his 1656 *Disputatio theologica de lamiis veneficis* (*Theological dispute about witches and poisoners*): the witches ordinarily gathered at the wine cellars on Mount St. Gellért near Buda, an ill-famed hill called *Blocksberg* by local Germans.

The first data suggesting popular adoption of demonological ideas also came from regions mainly inhabited by Germans. A witch's alliance with the devil is mentioned in 1581 at the Upper Hungarian mining town of Selmecbánya (Schemnitz; Banská Stiavnica). Western Hungarian cities - like Kőszeg, Sopron, and Pozsony - might have been affected by witch hunts spreading eastward from Austria during the 1560s. One of the first popular descriptions of witches flying on broomsticks and copulating with the devil came from the city of Pozsony in 1602. It was also in this region, around such communities as Sopron, Körmend, Lakompak, or Darázsfalva (Trausdorf), that extended series of popular Sabbat descriptions appeared when mass persecutions started in the 1650s. The other area with a similarly early appearance of popular diabolical beliefs was the seven self-governing Saxon towns (*Siebenbürgen*) of Transylvania. The cities of Segesvár (Sighisoara/Schassburg) or Nagyszeben (Sibiu/Hermannstadt) experienced regular and intensive witch hunting from the 1660s into the eighteenth century. Austrian and German soldiers, occupying Hungarian villages during and after the Turkish wars, constituted another important channel in mediating German conceptions of witchcraft throughout Hungary. In many local cases from

the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, German soldiers accused their hosts of witchcraft, sometimes even acting as witch finders.

However, witch hunting in Hungary seems as much a local and primarily urban phenomenon as an adoption of German demonological concepts. Among the first persecuting cities, both Kolozsvár in Transylvania and Debrecen on the Great Plain were mostly inhabited by Hungarians. Kolozsvár, a town of mixed religions, saw at least 21 witch trials between 1565 and 1593, with 15 resulting in burnings; Debrecen, which was then turning from Lutheran to Calvinist, probably received its first stimulus for witch hunting in the 1570s through wandering preachers from Kolozsvár. Moreover, the towns and villages of the Great Plain, a typical frontier society, occupied by Ottoman Turks until the end of the seventeenth century and almost completely resettled during the eighteenth century, saw no intensive witch persecution before the 1710s and 1720s. Although the Turks did not prevent local jurisdictions from functioning in this region, only in 1728 did one of Hungary's largest witch panics develop there, in the Catholic city of Szeged (Csongrád county), with 13 witches burned and a further 28 accused; in the nearby religiously-mixed town of Hódmezővásárhely, 41 people were tried between 1724 and 1763 (only 7 died at the stake). Similarly, twenty witches were accused in the village of Ottomány (Bihar county) in 1724; altogether, there were 107 accused witches (but only 15 capital sentences) in that predominantly Calvinist county between 1711 and 1730. These late witch hunts can best be explained by the belated urbanization of this region.

The popular image of the Hungarian Sabbat emerged less from foreign demonological concepts than from such local (and originally non-diabolical) sources as the *táltos* (a sort of shamanistic sorcerer) as well as from *tündér* (fairy) beliefs. The Sabbat encountered in Hungarian confessions resembles a village feast, with excessive eating, drinking, music, and dancing, held in ordinary houses, churchyards, or the local tavern, mostly without the devil's presence. In cases where the devil was present, he was modeled from stereotypes of learned diabolical witchcraft, appearing either as a billy goat or in human shape (a tall black man, a

priest, or a handsome peasant lad); such devils wore Hungarian dress in German-inhabited regions and German dress in ethically Hungarian regions.

Statistical and chronological patterns of witch hunting.

According to our present knowledge, 4,089 accused witches were brought to trial between 1213 and 1800 in the kingdom of Hungary (the total number of trials being 2,205). The vast majority of the accused, including everyone before 1500, were women: overall, women comprised 3,516 or 87 percent for the entire period, as opposed to 518 men. Similar gender percentages recur in local studies: for example, only 11 men (roughly 9 percent) were brought to trial in the city of Debrecen between 1575 and 1759, and 8 (barely 5 percent) in Bihar county between 1591 and 1766. By nationality, about two-thirds of these alleged witches (3,067) were Hungarian, the majority of the rest were Germans (362), Croatians (301) and Romanians (173), with occasional Slovaks (84), Gypsies (47), Ruthenians (23) and Serbs (9).

The exact rate of death sentences in Hungarian witch trials cannot yet be determined. Formerly, it was estimated at 51 percent (Klaniczay 1990a,b,c). According to the most recent statistics (based, however, on only 3,269 accused witches between 1213 and 1800), 498 witches (*i.e.,* roughly 34 percent) received capital punishments among the 1,468 people whose final sentence is known. One must, however, consider that for 1,801 persons (over half), the final sentence remains unknown. If we suppose the same percentage of the 1,801 people were executed as were the 498 witches whose sentences are known, we can add 612 executions, giving a total of 1,110 probable executions. The majority of those avoiding death received corporal punishment and/or were expelled, temporarily or permanently, from their communities. Only a small minority was acquitted. The capital sentence of convicted witches meant burning at the stake, without strangulation beforehand. No other methods of execution, such as hanging, seem to have been used.

Local rates of capital sentences vary. In the Calvinist city of Debrecen, among 147 witches (82 percent with known sentences) only 28 (roughly 27 percent) were executed, the majority burned. In mostly-Calvinist Bihar county, out of 177 witches (only 39 percent with known sentences), 26 people (roughly 38 percent) received capital punishment.

Early modern Hungarian witch hunting seems well embedded in the country's long-term local history. It tended to increase during peaceful periods after major wars and uprisings, and also coincided with the aftermath of devastating plague epidemics. It reached its first peak in the 1580s, a peaceful period but the aftermath of a plague epidemic. The intensity of the persecutions decreased during the Fifteen Years' War with the Turks (1591-1606) and the anti-Habsburg uprising of István Bocskai (1604-1606). The 1620s saw a new increase during a decade when Prince Gábor Bethlen of Transylvania led three campaigns against the Habsburgs. Individual trials usually occurred in peaceful years and regions, and it is highly probable that the plague epidemic of the 1620s helped intensify persecution during these years.

Another rise in Hungarian witch trials followed the end of the Thirty Years' War, from the 1650s, which included another big plague epidemic, until the 1670s; but the most dramatic increase occurred when the Ottomans were definitively driven out of Hungary after 1690. In the first half of the eighteenth century, Hungarian witch hunting reached its peak, especially after the end of the anti-Habsburg revolt led by Prince Ferenc Rákóczi (1703-1711), during and between the two greatest eighteenth-century plague epidemics (1709-1711 and 1738-1745).

Studies of local witch hunting nuance this pattern of long-term fluctuation. The generally small-size witch hunts of Debrecen and Bihar county (1-3 accused per annum) intensified during and after plague epidemics or other natural catastrophes, such as drought, frost, or famine (up to 5-10 accused per annum).

Although witch persecution seems to have started to decline in the 1750s, the Habsburg Empress Maria Theresa stopped it from above after 1756. After having examined personally a Slovenian woman named Heruczina accused of witchcraft, Gerard van Swieten, the enlightened court physician, submitted a memorandum to Maria Theresa in 1758 arguing that witchcraft charges are built on false concepts and suggesting that the persecution cease. The Royal Court first changed some municipal sentences of witches to acquittals, and then, in 1768, issued a royal decree permanently prohibiting the exectution of witches.

Microsociology of witchcraft accusations.

In this respect, early modern Hungarian witchcraft charges illustrate at least three significant patterns.

The first is 'accusations from above', a sociologically stronger, more powerful party accusing a weaker one. This pattern typifies the politically motivated witch trials among the Transylvanian high nobility during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The princes accusing the families of their defeated political enemies of witchcraft include Sigismund Báthory (blaming the mother of Boldizsár Báthory, whom he murdered, for his impotence); Gábor Bethlen (who, after having succeeded the murdered Gábor Báthory in 1612, accused the latter’s sister and two other noblewomen in his entourage with witchcraft); and Mihály Apafy (initiating a major witch trial, with some 20 accused between 1679 and 1686, against the wife of his exiled rival).

Similar patterns are also manifest in early modern town and village witchcraft. For example, in the Calvinist city of Debrecen, prosperous burgher merchants and artisans accused their lodgers, their house servants, or the city beggars of witchcraft in dozens of cases, in the context of a local socio-political campaign against the poor. In the same place at the same time, 'honest' Puritan citizens accused 'adulteresses,' 'drunkards,' 'thieves,' or 'blasphemous' women of the same crime (53 people, roughly 36 percent of all Debrecen

witches). The 'from above' pattern can also be seen in two other typical forms of social conflict in the eighteenth-century frontier world of the Great Plain. Local people had a considerable inclination to accuse strangers and newcomers of witchcraft (in Bihar and Csongrád county as well as in Debrecen or Hódmezővásárhely); such formerly privileged social groups as the *hajdú* (Haiduk) nobles, who lost their administrative, economic, and military privileges after the end of the Turkish occupation, used the weapon of witchcraft to get rid of newcomer peasants settling in their communities.

A second and complementary pattern is 'accusations from below', a sociologically weaker party accusing a more powerful one. This pattern seems to have been typical in some Hungarian witch panics; for example, in the 1728 trials in the Catholic city of Szeged, a poor "wise woman" and a beggar accused a former judge, Dániel Rósa, of witchcraft. Other local magistrates and judges similarly found themselves or their families accused, *e.g.* in the 1724 Ottomány panic, the 1724 Nagykereki panic, or the 1734 Kiskunhalas panic. Another recurrent manifestation of this pattern can be seen when 14-16 year-old maidservants or even 9-12 year-old children accused their landlords, hosts, or even grandparents of witchcraft. Sometimes this occurred during witch panics, sometimes not: child accusers first appeared in Kolozsvár towards the end of local witch panics in 1615 and 1629; however, young kitchen maids and children were constantly present as accusers in scattered Debrecen and Bihar county trials until well into the 1760s.

Accordingly, the 'from below' pattern also occurred in periods of rather moderate witch hunting. It can be seen in the eighteenth-century Debrecen trials in a few cases where lodgers accused their hosts of witchcraft; and also in the far more frequent cases where clients accused "wise women", midwives or other magical experts of curing the sick - inadequately. Such accusations suggest a considerable degradation of the traditional status of these popular healers. The Haiduk nobles of the Estate of Derecske were themselves charged with witchcraft by the local peasants during the eighteenth century, who tried to bring the trials

before the landlord's court, trusting that the landlord, a political adversary of the Haiduks, would decide in the peasants' favor.

The third pattern is 'status rivalry,' witchcraft accusations developing among those of similar social rank. The most typical form of this pattern emerged as a personal competition among cunning folk (called in Hungarian *tudós* or *orvos*, "wise (wo)man"); a large number of Hungarian witchcraft accusations arose in this way. The first victims of the Kolozsvár trials in 1565 were nearly all cunning folk mutually accusing one another. The same holds for the Debrecen trials: 45 persons, roughly 31 percent of all accused witches, were practitioners of popular magic: "wise women" brought charges against each other, midwives against other midwives, and - a typical urban phenomenon – barber-surgeons and official midwives testified against their colleagues. This type of witchcraft accusations seems to have been quite closely connected to the reorganization of Debrecen's local health care system during the eighteenth century.

Tudós pásztorok, "wise" or cunning shepherds also found themselves charged with witchcraft during the seventeenth and especially the eighteenth century, either by their village clients, or by their shepherd colleagues. A peculiar form of these charges seems too have been founded on werewolf-beliefs; such cases appeared all over Hungarian territory. It is highly probable that these charges were connected with the crisis of the old cattle-herding lifestyle, lowering the social status of the shepherds, and itself embedded in the Hungary's great economic and social transformations after the Turkish occupation.

--Ildikó Sz. Kristóf

See also Bekker, Balthasar; Brenz, Johann; Carolina Code; Carpzov, Benedict; Hopkins, Matthew; Hungary and Southeastern Europe, magic; Hungary and Southeastern Europe, witchcraft; lycanthrophy; Maria Theresa, Holy Roman Empress; Perkins, William; Protestant

Reformation; Puritanism; Roman Catholic Church; *táltos*; van Swieten, Gerard; Weyer, Johann

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