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förgörning to trolldom: A History of Danish Witchcraft and Magic

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förgörning to *trolldom*: A History of Danish Witchcraft
and Magic

By

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of the requirements for
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ABSTRACT

ROBERT, COLE A History of Danish Witchcraft and Magic

ADVISOR: Professor Steven Sargent

Numerous historical texts have evaluated European witchcraft trials and beliefs to discover the political, social, theological, economic, and cultural factors that led to the persecution of accused witches. These texts largely focus on the trials in Continental Europe, predominantly Southwestern Germany, with scant mentions of the trials in northern Europe. The Danish witchcraft trials in the early seventeenth century are significant to the greater history of witchcraft because they were highly concentrated yet resulted in relatively few executions. This paper seeks to determine the origins of the Danish witch trials and to explain why the death toll was restrained, with the larger goal of presenting a concise image of Danish witchcraft.

An approach to Danish witchcraft begins in the Middle Ages, where Denmark's popular magical beliefs encountered Catholic ideology. Understanding the Danish "magical worldview" is crucial to understanding where witchcraft ideology originated. The Reformation and the subsequent arrival of Lutheranism in Denmark further influenced popular magic beliefs, alongside the influx of witchcraft pamphlets and stories from Continental Europe. King Christian IV introduced his Ordinance Against Witches in 1617, which is largely considered the catalyst for the significant increase in witchcraft trials from 1617-1625. The potential destruction caused by the increase in witchcraft accusations and trials was restrained by a preexisting legal structure that protected accused witches from a conviction based on hearsay, torture, and suspicion. During the second half of the seventeenth century, the witchcraft trials declined, due

to increased skepticism among the Danish upper classes and a lack of potential victims. Popular witchcraft belief persisted among the lower classes and still exists in Denmark today.

Danish witchcraft concept developed from popular beliefs about magic, which could be beneficial or maleficent, into an ideology that included the diabolical pact and traces of the Sabbath. This was not so different from the concept of the witch found in Continental Europe. Although the Catholic and, later, Lutheran churches succeeded in demonizing practitioners of magic, the diabolical concept did not play a significant role in witchcraft trials. The Danish court system was secular and prevented ecclesiastical authorities from orchestrating a large-scale campaign against witchcraft. Even after the 1617 Ordinance outlined witchcraft as a crime based on a pact with the Devil, trials continued to focus on physical or economic harm that could be remedied. Legislation that afforded accused witches protection against trial practices like those found in Southwestern Germany resulted in a significant amount of acquittals. Ultimately, the Danish witchcraft trials had the potential to result in the widespread slaughter of accused witches, but the progressive legislation and practical judicial mindset prevented the situation from escalating.

Chapter 1: Magic and Witchcraft in the Medieval Period

Denmark's early modern witchcraft trials were not simply the product of imported beliefs about the devil and his supernatural powers. They originated in and were shaped by, the longstanding local beliefs that had developed in Denmark prior to the arrival of Christianity. To understand how Danes grew to believe in the presence of witches within their communities, it is critical to first understand popular magic beliefs.

Magic in medieval Denmark, and throughout the Nordic world, was not seen as purely spiritual but rather primarily from a functional perspective. Charms had a role in mundane daily activities that reflected common concerns of the period, such as protecting one from illness, predicting future weather, aiding in birthing, divining the result of an upcoming harvest, or even protecting from supernatural forces.¹ Practitioners of this practical magic may have been attracted by its potential physical effects, however, magic is also notable for its social effects, as a tool by which groups of people can attempt to understand their surroundings.² These individuals subscribe to a so-called "magical worldview," denoting their belief in a world where nothing happens by accident and everything happens as a result of the actions of others. This means that a population can control what happens to them by influencing the people within their community. The ability to isolate an individual who is wreaking havoc within a community (a witch, perhaps) and fix the problem by using countermagic, exile, or execution is

¹ Stephen Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 37.

² Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark, eds, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Period of the Witch Trials* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 57.

understandably desirable.³ Magic served a practical function in medieval Denmark and often appeared as a valuable tool to make life easier, however it could just as easily be used to harm the lives of others.

Rural Nordic laws of the early medieval period seemingly contained penalties solely against the use of magic that physically harmed men, women, or animals, in line with comparable laws in Continental Europe. The notable aspect of these early laws was that magic itself was not considered criminal or even immoral, it was using magic to harm other people that concerned the authorities. The Nordic term they used to define this malicious magic was *förgörning*, which means “to destroy,” essentially their equivalent to the Roman and Canon *maleficium*.⁴ During this period the crime was treated in the same vein as manslaughter, meaning the victim’s family were legally permitted to take revenge by killing the sorcerer or witch. Over the years the ancient code was replaced with a formal death penalty and killing cattle with magic became a crime punishable by death.⁵

Not until the twelfth century did statutes emerge in church law that prohibited the use of innocuous magical practices, undoubtedly at the behest of the Catholic Church. These low-profile instances of “superstitious” practices were to be brought before the bishop’s court.⁶ Although Danish church law reflected a concern about the use of popular magic and *maleficium*, the secular laws were relatively quiet regarding witchcraft. Section 7 of the Scanian Church Law and section 11 of the Sealandic Church Law, promulgated around 1170, mention

³ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 41.

⁴ Ankarloo, *Witch Trials*, 65.

⁵ Ankarloo, *Witch Trials*, 66.

⁶ Ankarloo, *Witch Trials*, 66.

sorcery, although only in connection to homicide.⁷ The Jutland Law Code of 1241 ignored magic completely and did not address it at all for another century and a half.⁸ Swedish and Norwegian law codes contained explicit criminalization of magical crimes and outlined judicial procedure and punishments.⁹ Scania established in the Municipal Laws of 1328 that, “if a man destroys (*forgiør*) a woman, or a woman a man, or a woman a woman through witchcraft or other sorcery, so that person dies, a man should be sent to the wheel, a woman burned.”¹⁰ Procedural outlines on the treatment of *maleficium/förgörning* appeared in the Jutland law code near the end of the Middle Ages, probably borrowed from the statutes of Scania and Sealand.¹¹

Although there are few documented Danish trials of sorcery and witchcraft from the medieval period, there are references to witchcraft that suggests a significant level of concern about malicious magic. Pope Gregory VII, in a 1080 letter, urged King Harald III of Denmark not to hold certain women accountable for life’s misfortunes, presumably referring to witches.¹² Over a century later the marriage of Ingeborg of Denmark to King Philipp II Augustus of France resulted in a bizarre accusation of sorcery. In 1193 Philipp claimed he had been bewitched by his new queen on their wedding night, although she is never explicitly accused of witchcraft.¹³ Pope Gregory’s letter and Philipp II’s marriage constitute just about all the explicit cases where

⁷ Jens Christian V Johansen, “Denmark: The Sociology of Accusations,” in *Early Modern European Witchcraft: Centres and Peripheries*, eds. Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen (New York, Oxford University Press, 1993), 339.

⁸ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 154.

⁹ Ankarloo, *Witch Trials*, 66.

¹⁰ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 154.

¹¹ Ankarloo, *Witch Trials*, 66.

¹² Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 169.

¹³ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 169.

witchcraft is mentioned before the late Middle Ages, although there is certainly more evidence of magic's prevalence in Danish society. Documents from as early as 1208 provide evidence that magic had long been an established part of Danish culture and, in the post-Christianized era, the influx of religion had influenced perceptions of popular magic and its practitioners.

Christianization of Denmark

Pinpointing an exact date to mark the moment Denmark became Christianized is impossible and a dangerous oversimplification, but by dating the period when the ruling monarch or tribal leader converted we can provide a rough estimation for when a significant portion of Denmark was Christian. Of course, this does not suggest that all of Denmark had converted by this point. The first Danish ruler recorded as having converted to Christianity was Harald "Klak" Halfhandsson, recorded as having been baptized in 826 to gain the support of Louis the Pious, who took over his father's war against the Danes.¹⁴ Halfhandsson, however, likely never returned to Denmark after his baptism and therefore had little to no influence on the conversion process. Christianity did arrive in Denmark in 826, but not in the hands of Halfhandsson.

The missionary Ansgar, also known as the Apostle of the North, set up a school for young natives in Denmark and soon after built a church in Hedeby.¹⁵ Ansgar left for Sweden in 828, so it is difficult to judge his long term religious influence in Denmark, but his missionary

¹⁴ Charles H. Robinson, *Anskar: The Apostle of the North, 801-865* (The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, 1961). Emperor Charlemagne waged a series of wars against the Saxons because they were un-Christian, although he died in the midst of his war with the Danes in 814. Louis took over and was sought out for support by Harald Krag, who needed help during a struggle for royal succession in Denmark.

¹⁵ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 30.

efforts may have led to the conversion of the man most often referred to as the one who Christianized Denmark. According to a selection of rune stones in Jelling, Jutland, suggest that King Haraldr Bluetooth “made Denmark Christian” sometime between 965 and 985.¹⁶ Again, even if Bluetooth “made” Denmark Christian in a broad sense, it is doubtful he had the influence to convert all of Denmark at a command. A surviving story from Widukind’s “Deeds of the Saxons” seemingly shows the moment that Christian magic, in the form of a miracle, usurped popular magic during the conversion experience. According to the story, Haraldr Bluetooth challenged the belief in Christ as the singular god. A man named Poppo accepted the challenge and proved the power of Christ by performing a miracle, in this case carrying a load of heated iron without being burned. Haraldr was impressed by this feat and converted to Christianity while ordering his subjects to follow his lead.¹⁷ Similar stories tend to be staples in conversion narratives because they show the superiority of Christianity over the local religion or belief system, in this case, the traditional Nordic religion.

Understanding how Christianity influenced Danish magic beliefs requires an evaluation of how Danes viewed magic prior to the arrival of Christianity. Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to do so because there are few records from pre-Christian Denmark detailing the popular magic practices and beliefs. The ninth-century Nørre Nærå stone, located on the island of Funen, is inscribed with one of several grave-binding inscriptions designed to keep the inhabitant from returning to the land of the living. The imprecation on this stone, “Make good use of the monument! Þormundr” denotes a form of charm magic from the early Middle

¹⁶ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 32.

¹⁷ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 32..

Ages.¹⁸ Another such record is Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* (History of the Danes), a series of sixteen books written between 1190 and 1208. His collection includes a characterization of the three types of sorcerers, notable for their skill in magic and divination, who practiced magic in ancient Denmark.¹⁹ *Gesta Danorum* describes Harthgrepa's necromancy spells, Ollerus's magical transvection, the raising of a *niðstǫng* (a "scorn-pole," upon which a horse's head might be carved along with runes, intended to bring shame or harm upon an evildoer), charm magic worked by Othinus, and the story of a witch transmogrifying a horse and then turned herself and her family into marine mammals.²⁰ Grammaticus's work provides an insight into the framework for the magical beliefs that might have existed in a pre-Christian Denmark, although the accuracy of his work is ambiguous considering he wrote it in the post-Christian era. Therefore, it is impossible to develop conclusions about pre-Christian magic in Denmark, and we can only work from a tenuous picture of what might have been.

We can see, however, how magic was viewed in Denmark following the influx of Christianity, but still prior to the recorded beginning of witchcraft trials. For a while, there were ambiguous delineations about what magic was acceptable to practice and what should be condemned by the ecclesiastical authorities. The Christian authorities were not overly concerned with popular magical beliefs for several reasons. Popular, or "pagan," magic and Christian magic overlapped a fair amount and therefore the framework for magical belief in medieval Denmark could be used as a bridge by which missionaries could communicate

¹⁸ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 22.

¹⁹ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 105.

²⁰ Charlotte F. Otten, *A Lycanthropy Reader: Werewolves in Western Culture* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 157; Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 105.

Christianity.²¹ The story of Haraldr and Poppo's encounter is an example of this syncretic function. By establishing Christian beliefs within the pre-existing framework of popular magic, missionaries can demonstrate the superior power of Christian magic without directly challenging the traditional concept of magic in Denmark. Pagan rituals could be incorporated into Christian worship and take on Christian interpretations as a means of smoothly introducing a Christian belief system, instead of the alternate process wherein a clear delineation is formed between the old pagan beliefs and new Christian beliefs. The gradual introduction and integration of Christian beliefs is certainly a more effective conversion method and less likely to provoke local resistance.

A notable difference between Christian and pagan magic, in the eyes of ecclesiastical authorities, was the power source. Pagan magic might call upon Porr (Thor) to provide protection, while a similar Christian charm would invoke the name Michael.²² The former spell is at risk for condemnation by the Church and the latter would be acceptable. It does not matter that each spell serves the same practical function. The Catholic Church's goal was indoctrinating Danes into Christianity, and they persecuted popular magic that did not rely on the power of God.

As this example demonstrates, the dividing line between local magic, such as charm magic, superstition, and witchcraft, and "high magic," is somewhat ambiguous. Classifying theurgical magic, *maleficium*, and charm magic was the subject of neo-Platonic debate in the thirteenth century.²³ It grew increasingly difficult to classify specific spells because they

²¹ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 39.

²² Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 44.

²³ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 45.

featured aspects of all three distinctions. A popular spell in Scandinavia called for inscribing a piece of lead with the Gospel of John's *In principio* to create an amulet that would protect against elves.²⁴ This combination of Christian, pagan, and learned magic would have impeded attempts to identify the spell as part of a singular group. At a village level, however, these delineations were of little concern to medieval Danes. They were solely concerned with the efficacy of magic and left the discussion of formal semantics to scholars and clerics.²⁵

Learned clerics were interested in acquiring the skills involved in so-called "natural" magic, the type practiced by the local "clever" men and women.²⁶ Following the death of Danish archbishop Jens Grand in 1327, a book about alchemy was discovered in his library. Not until the end of the 14th century did the church begin to question its position on alchemy, and whether the "science's" goals were in line with Christian teachings.²⁷ A Danish leechbook (book of medical prescriptions) included recipes that demonstrated the blending of learning and magic with respect to the grimoire (book of magical spells/invocations). The pharmaceutical recipes in one mid-to-late 14th-century leechbook reflect an overlap in medicine and magic. To discover if a man is sick, the book notes, one should pour a drop of breast milk into a cup of the man's urine. If the milk sinks he is sick, but if not he is in good health.²⁸ If one seeks to identify the sex of an unborn fetus they should add a drop of the breast milk to a bucket of spring water. Floating milk indicates a boy, while sinking indicates a girl.²⁹ To protect livestock against

²⁴ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 45.

²⁵ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 45.

²⁶ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 48.

²⁷ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 48.

²⁸ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 47.

²⁹ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 47.

thieves or wolves, one should inscribe a Latin prayer on the doorpost where the animals leave and enter. One spell says, “If you don’t want your wife to take another man, take the liquid of the ‘common houseleek’ and smear your penis with it, and then lie with your wife and after that, while you are alive, she will not have ‘sexual relations’ with another man.”³⁰

This leechbook also contained a remedy for licentiousness that displays the interweaving of natural magic and theurgical influence. It starts with bland instructions to combine the juice of a gladiola with wine or water but notably requires that the ingredients be blended while the *Pater noster* is being “read.”³¹ This spell, just like the protective charm for livestock, blends the natural magic with religion and thereby validating it in the eyes of clerics.

Further texts from the 15th century indicate the persistence of these beliefs. Notes from 1420 written by Archbishop Peter regarding the recently deceased bishop of Århus, Bo Morgensen, indicate that Morgensen had engaged in “peculiar arts,” including alchemy, medicine, and geometry.³² A Danish teacher’s manual from between 1452 and 1467 provides directions for charms against fever, disease, toothache, and two charms against theft. The first of the theft charms is particularly interesting because it includes the phrases, “in the name of the devil” and “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.”³³ Examples such as these, and the few in the preceding paragraph, provide evidence of magic’s function in society, as a tool that enabled common and learned Danes to control certain aspects of their lives. At this point, popular, or natural magic, had not become a focus of secular prosecution in the same vein as *maleficium*.

³⁰ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 47.

³¹ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 47.

³² Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 48,

³³ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 49; In Latin, *in nomine dyaboli ... in nomine domini ihesu Christi*.

Even the ecclesiastical authorities were not focused on prosecuting popular magic, although they began to display concern about the danger of witchcraft during the 15th century. A mid-fifteenth-century priest from Ribe, Peder Madsen, widely condemned witchcraft during his sermons. Among other things, he warned priests to guard against the subversion of Christianity's tools, that is, baptismal water and the communion host, for use in charm magic.³⁴ A decree from later in the fifteenth century further warned priests to safeguard their holy oil and Eucharist under lock and key, to protect against harm from magic and other "threatening dangers," perhaps specifically witchcraft.³⁵

Concern about Magic

Medieval Scandinavians were principally concerned with the efficacy of magic, but they were by no means unaware of the difference between acceptable and condemned magic. Magic functioned as a tool in the everyday lives of peasants and gentry alike, it was commonplace. Many forms of magic, whether connected to pagan or clerical beliefs, were considered beneficial and accepted in Danish society. The malevolent forms, however, were unacceptable and became consolidated into the notion of witchcraft, i.e., *trolldómur*, *fjölkyngi*, *fordǫa*, *forneskja*, *fyrnska*, etc.³⁶ Even if magic itself was not concerning, the potential for someone to wield magic as a weapon evoked fear. Late medieval texts featured spells and recipes intended to guard against witchcraft. One medical treatise said to place fish bile in a juniper pail and cover it with glowing coals because the stench would drive witches away. This could also be achieved using dog bile, again because the smell caused witches to lose their

³⁴ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 204.

³⁵ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 168.

³⁶ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 49-50.

power.³⁷ Thus magic served the purpose of both aiding in everyday activities and in protecting against malicious magic.

Updates to the Jutlandic Law reflected an increased concern about witchcraft as the medieval period progressed, although there is only one paragraph specifically referring to witchcraft. The circa 1400 document reads; “Concerning Witchcraft. If one knows of someone that he has killed one of his people through witchcraft and the accused does not confess but rather denies it, and the accuser confirms the charge against him, then the accused should defend himself with a committee (drawn from) the parish, face to face with the accuser as with the bishop.”³⁸ This statute does not define witchcraft in legal terms, instead focusing on legal procedure for dealing with accusations, but it does suggest a concern for witchcraft as a crime at the beginning of the 15th century. Another statute from the late fifteenth century, titled “Concerning Magic,” forbade clerics from utilizing or engaging with any form of magic because all were thought to be related to the Devil. This rule is attributed to the Archbishop of Lund, Jens Brostrup.³⁹ This statute is notable because it suggests the concept of magic and witchcraft had been introduced to the diabolical aspect, likely as a result of influence from texts and beliefs transferred from Continental Europe.

There is also artistic evidence that the diabolical concept of the witch that was prevalent in Continental Europe had made its way to Denmark, although it had not taken on a significant emphasis. Mitchell cites the images of milk-stealing witches in late 15th-century church iconography, specifically in church paintings. There are supposedly sixteen churches in Denmark

³⁷ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 51.

³⁸ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 205.

³⁹ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 168.

that feature images of witches, often aided by demons, stealing milk and beer.⁴⁰ The church paintings are interesting because their existence suggests a widespread notion that witchcraft was linked to the Devil, even though the diabolical concept did not play a significant role in the trials.

From the scant evidence of early medieval witchcraft trials, we can surmise based on the early medieval laws and these references to sorcery that there were likely other instances of witchcraft accusations in Denmark. The earliest case, or at least the earliest documented case, of an explicit witchcraft accusation in Denmark appears in 1471. A man was accused of stealing and hoarding the communion host, likely for use in witchcraft just as the ecclesiastical regulations warned against. He must have been found guilty, for it was said that his hands were cut off before he was burned alive.⁴¹ A few decades later, Christian II's 1521 *Landslov* introduced legislation specifically mentioning witches. Article 78 of the law highlighted the element of the Sabbath as a means of identifying witches and suggests that the notion of witches meeting at certain times of the day or year was common among the Danish elite. Article 78 of the *Landslov* specifies the places and times that ought to arouse suspicion.

According to the law, witches:

Appear in places that are out of the way, and as follows [:] night time, late in the evening [and early] morning, near running water, and other holy times [such as] Maundy Thursday and Walpurgis Night, and that they are said to spend more time on these than on other (festive) times during the year.⁴²

⁴⁰ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 140, 182-183.

⁴¹ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 172.

⁴² Louise Nyholm Kallestrup, *Agents of Witchcraft in Early Modern Italy and Denmark* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 35.

The wording of Christian II's law suggests that a witchcraft ideology, including the concept of the Sabbath, was present in the early sixteenth century. His decision to introduce legislation against witches further suggests there was a growing fear of witchcraft in Denmark, even though his law was abolished when he was deposed in 1523.⁴³

Despite the limited evidence pertaining specifically to witchcraft from Medieval Denmark, it is clear that magical beliefs have a significant history and prominent role in Danish society. Magic was a mundane part of daily life for Danes and functioned as a practical solution to the anxieties they faced. While it was most often used for beneficial purposes, such as healing or protecting crops, it could, like any other tool, be abused by those who wanted to harm their neighbors. Legal procedures for dealing with harmful magic focused on the physical damage that a charm had wrought on the victim. In this sense the Danish approached prosecuting magic from a practical angle, punishing practitioners of maleficent magic for the harm they caused and not for using magic itself. This perspective remained prevalent throughout the witchcraft trials of the seventeenth century, even after King Christian IV's 1617 law defined witchcraft as a crime in terms of the diabolical pact.

The widespread belief in popular magic serves as a significant precondition for the later witchcraft trials. As Catholic missionaries and clergymen attempted to spread the religion throughout Denmark, they began to influence the popular beliefs through texts that forbade the use of magic. The Church's agenda of persecuting popular magic, both beneficial and maleficent, pushed Denmark towards an understanding that magic was inherently evil and had

⁴³ Kallestrup, *Agents of Witchcraft*, 35.

no place in their communities. In the case of popular beliefs, often labeled superstitions, that the Church would be hard pressed to eradicate, they attempted to implement aspects of Catholic belief and slowly indoctrinate the Danish population. The Church was largely unsuccessful in promulgating a distrust of magic because Danes remained focused on the physical results of magic.⁴⁴ Without formal influence over the secular courts, the Catholic clergy could not prosecute practitioners of magic. Their only form of influence was social, and the result they achieved was to begin a transition towards a negative view of magic that would not be realized for a few centuries.⁴⁵ It took a significant period of time for Danes to understand that magic was inherently evil and for it to develop an association with the Devil.

Therefore, the Danish Middle Ages can be seen as a vital background to the witchcraft trials of the seventeenth century. During this period ancient magic beliefs solidified into widespread popular belief and the Church's influence began directing Danes toward a negative perception of the magic they considered mundane. The Medieval Period also included a series of legal statutes that set precedents for dealing with witchcraft accusations, several of which were critical factors in limiting the extent of the seventeenth-century trials. Ultimately, an understanding of Denmark's magic situation during the Medieval Period is critical in understanding where the witchcraft trials came from and why they did not wreak the same level of destruction in Denmark as in the countries of Continental Europe, such as Germany.

⁴⁴ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 45.

⁴⁵ Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 39.

Chapter 2: Concept of the Witch in Denmark

The Danish concept of witches and their magical practices is complicated. It took years to develop from ancient Nordic beliefs into popular magic beliefs and then into a witchcraft ideology. The Christianization of Denmark during the medieval period began the process of transitioning popular magic belief into a concept of witchcraft, but the process was not one of immediate acculturation. By the time Lutheranism arrived in Denmark the common perception of magic was still delineated by whether it was used for beneficial or harmful results. The Lutheran clergy began an aggressive campaign against popular magic because they saw it as a final sanctuary for vestiges of Catholic belief and because they wanted to indoctrinate Danes into proper Lutheran worship. Texts written by prominent Lutheran clergymen condemned magic as witchcraft and, while the Lutheran Church had no influence over the secular courts, the texts helped to incorporate a concept of witchcraft into the Danish popular beliefs. From a cultural perspective, the Church served a powerful influence in the witchcraft trials of the early seventeenth century. The witchcraft ideology Denmark developed as a result of the Reformation offered Danes common attributes from which to draw details for their accusations.

The Protestant Reformation

Lutheranism developed in the early sixteenth century following the publication of Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses in 1517 and the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. The Lutheran branch quickly spread throughout Europe and made its way to Denmark during

the 1520s, although it took longer to establish itself as the state religion. In October 1536, under King Christian III, the Danish Lutheran Church was created and the following year a new set of bishops were appointed. By 1539 the organization of the new Church was complete.⁴⁶ From this point forward all crimes of a magical nature fell under the jurisdiction of the secular courts, not the Church.

The process of eradicating popular beliefs in Denmark, began when the country was Catholic, was bolstered by the Reformation. In fact, throughout Europe, the attack on local superstition intensified as a result of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, respectively.⁴⁷ In some countries, this campaign against so-called paganism emerged as witchcraft persecutions, but the Danish clergy remained focused on practical magic, such as healing magic, instead of seeking out potential witches.⁴⁸ That is not to say the clergy did not rail widely against witchcraft, because they did, but they included it in their sermons against all forms of magic. The clerics who sought persecution of popular magic and superstitions were motivated by a desire to indoctrinate the populace, and as such, they often targeted the local cunning folk.⁴⁹

There were several reasons why the cunning folk presented a threat in the eyes of the Lutheran clergy. For one, the Danes' belief in the power of local cunning folk was antithetical to the Lutheran message. They were a vestige of the magical worldview held by the Danes,

⁴⁶ Louise Nyholm Kallestrup, "The Infected and the Guilty: On Heresy and Witchcraft in Post-Reformation Denmark," in *Contesting Orthodoxy in Medieval and Modern Europe*, eds. Louise Nyholm Kallestrup and Raisa Maria Toivo (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 234.

⁴⁷ Ankarloo and Clark, *Witchcraft*, 60.

⁴⁸ Ankarloo and Clark, *Witchcraft*, 60.

⁴⁹ Timothy R. Tangherlini, "'How Do You Know She's a Witch?': Witches, Cunning Folk, and Competition in Denmark," *Western Folklore* 59, No. 3/4 (Summer-Autumn 2000), 281.

wherein all problems were attributed to magic and could be solved best by opposing magic. Luther preached that these same problems were sent by God as punishment for sinning and could only be prevented by following the Lutheran teachings.⁵⁰ If the Lutheran clergy wanted Danish peasants to abandon their local cunning folk in favor of the Church, they needed to demonize the cunning folk. Additionally, during the Middle Ages, the Catholic clergy's influence had resulted in a melding of religious rituals with popular magic, meaning that the local practices had become a form of safe havens for remnants of Catholicism. This further motivated the Lutheran clergy to persecute cunning folk and local magicians. By eradicating popular magic, they could indoctrinate the Danes into Lutheranism and simultaneously remove the threat of Catholic ideology from Danish society.⁵¹

Lutheran Witchcraft Ideology

Although the Lutheran clergy had no legal jurisdiction in post-Reformation Denmark, they still featured prominently as cultural influencers through their publications and sermons. Lutheran theologians produced many written works that depicted witchcraft and Catholicism as intrinsically linked.⁵² Their works associated the use of magical rituals in witchcraft with Catholic practices, which they portrayed as ritualistic in nature. Martin Luther himself explicitly described the Pope as “the very Antichrist, who has exalted himself above, and opposed himself against Christ because he will not permit Christians to be saved without his power, which, nevertheless, is nothing, and is neither ordained nor commanded by God” and claims

⁵⁰ Tangherlini, *How Do You Know*, 281.

⁵¹ Tangherlini, *How Do You Know*, 281.

⁵² Louise Nyholm Kallestrup. “‘When Hell Became Too Small:’ Constructing Witchcraft in Post-Reformation Denmark.” In *Cultural Histories of Crime in Denmark, 1500 to 2000* edited by Tyge Krogh, Louise Nyholm Kallestrup, and Claus Bundgård Christensen, 19-37. New York: Routledge, 2017. 21.

that Christians can no more tolerate the pope than “the devil himself as Lord and God.”⁵³ The Lutheran Church had a clear agenda that was focused on the dual goals of indoctrinating the Danish populace and eradicating local practices and beliefs. Luther himself set the precedent for how Lutheran clergy should treat magic and followers of the faith in Denmark spread his message.

Peder Palladius, a clergyman who studied at Wittenberg, took up the mantle of the bishop of Sealand and published his *Visitation Book (En Visitatsbog)* around 1540.⁵⁴ His book was intended as a guide for bishops who traveled the country and visited local diocese, providing them with an outline for keeping local clerics in order and instructions on educating localities in the new faith. Part of the book spoke out against the inherent sins of practicing magic, whether beneficial or *maleficium*.⁵⁵ An effective method Palladius used to alienate the cunning folk from their communities was to label all forms of magic as *trolldom*, the Danish word for sorcery and the closest equivalent to witchcraft, thereby implying malice within their spells.⁵⁶ Furthermore, he states that anyone who seeks the help of cunning folk is equally complicit in their sin. His book interrelates witchcraft and Catholicism, telling readers that a witch can, “make the sign of the Crosse for gout and pangs. She was taught by the Devil and the monks.”⁵⁷ Palladius thereby warns the Danish people, via the clerics who read his *Visitation Book*, to stay away from both the cunning folk and Catholicism. He never denies there is power in the sign of the Cross but reminds the people that the power comes from the Devil: “It may

⁵³ Martin Luther, *The Smalcald Articles* Part 2 Article 4 Paragraph 10.

⁵⁴ Kallestrup, *Guilty and Infected*, 237.

⁵⁵ Kallestrup, *Guilty and Infected*, 238.

⁵⁶ Kallestrup, *Guilty and Infected*, 238.

⁵⁷ Kallestrup, *When Hell*, 21-22.

well be that you think your cow will do better, but your soul will be condemned to the abyss of hell through making the sign of the cross.”⁵⁸

Another prominent Danish theologian, Niels Hemmingsen, further condemned Catholicism and witchcraft in tandem. He was another product of the University of Wittenberg and, by the time Palladius died in 1560, had achieved the post of Professor of Theology at the university.⁵⁹ He had also developed a reputation as a Calvinist due to his involvement in Phillipism, which resulted in the revocation of his professorship in 1579. Nonetheless, he retained his high status until he died in 1600.⁶⁰ During his life, Hemmingsen wrote several treatises against witchcraft and Catholicism, three of which were translated into Danish and published by Rasmus Reravius between 1570 and 1574. His texts, like Palladius’s, emphasize the sin of practicing or consulting with practitioners of magic. Hemmingsen writes in *En*

Undervisning:

The number of signs of the cross made and of incantations used, especially in the villages, when cattle fall ill, is quite countless. And they are not only used by heathens who know nothing of God, or by the impious, who set themselves up against God, for then it would not merit so great a complaint, but such blessings, spoken and written, are now used for illnesses suffering by man and beast, time and again, and are defended most of all by those who ought to be Christians and members of the church.⁶¹

Hemmingsen’s work mostly expands upon the words of Martin Luther, although this does not diminish his relevance to the Danish witchcraft trials. His treatises are the closest work of Danish origin to Kramer and Sprenger’s *Malleus Maleficarum* or James IV’s *Daemonologie*.

⁵⁸ Kallestrup, *Guilty and Infected*, 238

⁵⁹ Kallestrup, *Guilty and Infected*, 239.

⁶⁰ Kallestrup, *Guilty and Infected*, 239.

⁶¹ Preface to *En Undervisning* in Kallestrup, *Guilty and Infected*, 239-240.

Martin Luther made several remarks against witchcraft in his sermons, providing Hemmingsen with a base to work from. In the *Table Talk* from 1536 Luther's disciples noted that he "most inveighed against love philters and incantations, the Devil's whores," clearly referring to popular magic.⁶² A few years later, in another *Table Talk* from 1538, Luther railed against those who had forsaken God to follow the Devil, such as "the witch, the sorceress, the devil's whores with whom Satan comes together."⁶³ This statement clearly refers to an aspect of diabolical witchcraft ideology, namely that witches engage in sexual relations with the Devil, although this belief never truly transfers to Denmark. Luther claims, "there is no compassion to be had for these women; I would burn all of them myself, according to the law," thereby relating his hatred for witches.⁶⁴ As Hemmingsen later reiterates, Luther preached that witches had no power of their own and merely sought power from the Devil. Furthermore, the Devil himself only had the power God allowed him to use and all instances of demonic power were permitted by God as a means of testing the populace. According to Luther:

No one should believe that witches and diviners, in order to stir up storms, kill bodies, kill animals, destroy property, &c., are the real causes of these things, nor to believe that creatures of God have this power, except through demons who have God's permission...Except by the will of God no leaf falls from a tree to earth. Therefore, it is forbidden to Christians to think that these evils are caused by demons and witches and are thus ordained by God. God does good through himself, and evil through the evil ones.⁶⁵

This statement by Luther forms a basis for the Lutheran Church's attitude towards witchcraft, especially relevant to their mission of eradicating popular magic practices. Hemmingsen uses

⁶² Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, eds., *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 263.

⁶³ Kors and Peters, *Witchcraft*, 263.

⁶⁴ Kors and Peters, *Witchcraft*, 263.

⁶⁵ Kors and Peters, *Witchcraft*, 264-265.

this argument towards condemning the local cunning folk as witches, and further insisting that witches cannot coexist with a Christian community.

The primary argument against magic Hemmingsen uses is that witches have breached the First Commandment of Lutheranism – “Thou shalt not have strange gods before thee”.⁶⁶ Therefore, they have abandoned the faith altogether because the entire faith is contingent upon the First Commandment. On principle, then, witches have no place in a Christian community and must be removed. Hemmingsen outlines five reasons why witches should be condemned. Although magic only in the form of physically harmful *maleficium* constituted a crime in the secular courts, all magic was considered witchcraft by Hemmingsen and presented as a religious crime. A witch’s choice to seek power from the Devil made a mockery of God and emblazoned them with the crime of heresy and idolatry.⁶⁷ They should be condemned because they, “in their wickedness more greatly revere this false belief and idolatry than God’s commandments and precepts.”⁶⁸ Furthermore, they present a threat to the faith by potentially influencing their peers with, “their evil example.”⁶⁹

Hemmingsen’s core assertions were boiled down to the statement that, “anyone using this wickedness and false belief has forsaken and denied the faith, has fallen from God’s grace, and shown himself to be the servant of the Devil and not of Christ.”⁷⁰ The presence of witches in a community was seen by Hemmingsen as a disease with the potential to spread, resulting in more heretics and souls being lost. For Lutheran clergy, who taught that misfortune was the

⁶⁶ Kallestrup, *Guilty and Infected*, 240; Kors and Peters 264.

⁶⁷ Kallestrup, *Guilty and Infected*, 240.

⁶⁸ *En Undervisning* in Kallestrup, *Guilty and Infected*, 240.

⁶⁹ *En Undervisning* in Kallestrup, *Guilty and Infected*, 240.

⁷⁰ *En Undervisning* in Kallestrup, *Guilty and Infected*, 241.

result of God's punishment for a community's sins, popular magic, as witchcraft, appeared as an epidemic.⁷¹ Fortunately for the cunning folk these words targeted, heresy and idolatry were not crimes in the secular court and Hemmingsen could only attempt to influence the courts to see magic from this perspective.

Rasmus Reravius's translation of Hemmingsen's work from Latin, the language of the clerics, into Danish suggests an attempt to project his words onto the secular authorities. It falls in line with the Lutheran Church's agenda of criminalizing all forms of magic, not just *maleficium*, for the purpose of eradicating paganism and local beliefs in magic that did not originate with God. Hemmingsen's writing further points to the secular authorities as a target, for he makes sure to outline that magic is always derived from the Devil. The secular authorities would likely share the popular magic beliefs that persisted among the Danish commoners, and therefore would have been unable to understand how beneficial magic came from the Devil.⁷² Hemmingsen's *En Undervisning* explained that God displayed his power through divine acts and miracles, but the Devil could create the illusion of God's powers as a means of luring people into partaking of his sacraments. These sacraments were often reminiscent of Catholic practices, including signs, images, and figures, but mixed with popular magic in the form of salt, water, earth, paper, thread, etc.⁷³

Practitioners of magic had fallen prey to the Devil's trickery and had therefore committed themselves to a false religion. They were guilty in the Church's eyes of both heresy, because witchcraft mocked God, and of false belief. Ironically, Hemmingsen's insistence that

⁷¹ Kallestrup, *Guilty and Infected*, 239.

⁷² Kallestrup, *Guilty and Infected*, 241.

⁷³ Kallestrup, *Guilty and Infected*, 241.

magic came from and was powered by the Devil stood directly in line with Catholic beliefs.⁷⁴

The difference was his view towards pagans. He was willing to excuse their false beliefs because they did not know better, whereas Christians who practiced magic were “twice as bad and wicked” because they had renounced God and intentionally sinned.⁷⁵ There was, however, still hope for these Christians. If they acknowledged their sin and sought penance their soul could perhaps be saved. This key aspect of the Lutheran approach to witchcraft comes to play an important role in the Danish trial procedures of the seventeenth century.

Imported Witch Beliefs

While the Lutheran clergy worked to influence local attitudes towards magic and witchcraft through their writing, other ideas were arriving in Denmark from Continental Europe. A Danish translation of the Middle Low German *Seelentrost* from circa. 1425 included several tales of medieval origin that depicted the diabolical pact, usually as part of a trade for love and wealth.⁷⁶ Translations of religious propaganda, such as the story of Brother Rush, further emphasized the correlation between Catholicism and witchcraft. A notable dialogue between Peter Smed and Adser Bonde was published in Danish in 1577. Just as in the original German text, the pamphlet included two stories that featured associations between Catholicism and the Devil. One of the stories is about a Jesuit priest who attempts to lure a woman back to Catholicism from the Evangelical path she had set upon. The image on the pamphlet depicts the Jesuit as the Devil, clearly implying that the Catholic faith and the Devil are one and the same.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Kallestrup, *Guilty and Infected*, 241.

⁷⁵ Kallestrup, *Guilty and Infected*, 242.

⁷⁶ Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic*, 121. In English, *Consolation of the Soul*.

⁷⁷ Kallestrup, *When Hell*, 24.

This story falls directly in line with the Lutheran clergy's message and mission – that Catholicism is inherently demonic and must be eradicated alongside magic.

Another prominent translation of a German pamphlet, titled *En forskreckelig oc sand bescriffuelse, om mange Troldfolck: som ere forbrende for deris Misgierninger skyld, fra det Aar 1589 regnendis: oc huad deris vdretning oc bekendelse haffuer været, desligeste om en Troldkarl ved naffn stumme Peder* appeared in Denmark in 1591.⁷⁸ Although these sort of pamphlets were common in the German territories, England, and France, this text is the singular of its kind to be published in Denmark. The content of the pamphlet and the timing of its publication lend to its influence on popular witchcraft ideology in Denmark. According to the pamphlet, the bad weather, substandard harvests, and widespread epidemics in the Trier region were caused by a group of witches conspiring against Christians.⁷⁹ These witches, consisting of young and old men and women, had confessed to serving the Devil before they were burned at the stake. The pamphlet also mentions the trial of Dietrich Flade, who was accused, along with other wealthy members of the community, of cursing the local harvest for his own economic benefit. Flade emerged as the leader of the conspiracy and is referred to as the “instigator.”

The stories contained in *A true and horrible story* include several notable aspects of witchcraft ideology that featured prominently in the Danish concept of witchcraft. The trial of Flade presents witchcraft as an explicit economic threat that has the potential to harm the

⁷⁸ Kallestrup, *When Hell*, 24. In English, “A true and horrible story about many witches: who have been burnt for their misdeeds in 1589: and their explanation and confession, and also about a witch by the name Silent Peder, etc.”

⁷⁹ Kallestrup, *When Hell*, 24.

livelihood of the community. He is the leader of a group of witches who mutually conspire to harm the Christians, who they oppose. Witches align themselves with the Devil, who is himself eager to increase his territory. As the pamphlet warns, “The Devil complains that hell has become too small, and therefore he has sent his messenger to engage builders to make it larger.”⁸⁰ Here the Devil is not simply a source of power that witches have turned to, rather he is actively seeking to recruit witches who will do his bidding and spread his evil. This suggests that witches are the Devil’s minions and will attempt to lure other members of the community into similar servitude. The first detail is in line with Danish witchcraft ideology and, at this time, served as the sole aspect of witchcraft that was criminal. The two additional features were not criminalized in judicial legislation, but certainly influenced the popular witchcraft beliefs in Denmark and contributed to the fear of witchcraft.

By 1590, right before the pamphlet was published, there was already a fear of diabolical conspiracies against Christianity. In 1589 King Christian IV’s sister, Anne, set out with the Royal Danish fleet on a trip to Scotland, where she was set to marry King James VI. The boats were waylaid by a series of intense storms and had to seek refuge in Norway, where James met her and they wedded before heading to Denmark. While they were in Denmark a series of rumors circulated, alleging that witchcraft was the source of the poor weather they encountered. This led to the trial of Anne Koldings, which will be discussed in the following chapter. *A true and horrible story* referenced the infamous event, claiming that “God knew that, in 1589, there would be exceptionally many witches.”⁸¹ The translation of this pamphlet, in conjunction with

⁸⁰ Kallestrup, *When Hell*, 25.

⁸¹ Kallestrup, *When Hell*, 25.

the writings of Peder Palladius and Niels Hemmingsen, taught the Danish that witchcraft should be feared and condemned, although the secular courts did not adopt any new legislation concerning the crime.

Popular Witchcraft Belief

Church paintings from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century further suggest that the diabolical aspect of witchcraft was a part of the popular ideology, albeit interwoven with the economic threat that witches presented. Stephen Mitchell highlights the abundance of church murals throughout Denmark that depict witches and the Devil. In Denmark and Sweden, these images primarily reflected the concept of the milk-stealing witch. One painting from between 1460 and 1480 shows an old woman churning butter with two demons on either side of her, one of which is helping her churn.⁸² According to popular beliefs, the witch would have stolen milk with the demons' help. The Lutheran Church certainly bolstered this aspect of witchcraft ideology, for Martin Luther had told of a witch who had attempted to steal milk from her neighbor in the form of a mouse.⁸³

This mythology, alongside the Danish sayings that demonstrate a lack of envy, highlights the economic aspect of witchcraft ideology in Denmark. Communities that rely on products like milk would be terrified of a witch, for she presents a threat to their very livelihood. In addition, by stealing the product of someone else's work, she demonstrates her envy of their position. She wants more than she deserves. Furthermore, the concept of the milk-stealing witch reflects the "magical worldview" that Danes held, wherein a witch can serve as a scapegoat to blame

⁸² Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic*, 140.

⁸³ Kors and Peters, *Witchcraft*, 263.

for misfortune. If someone's cow produces less than the expected amount of milk and their economic status is thrown into jeopardy, their anxiety could not be decreased by an explanation that the cow lacked nutrients or water or some other rational reason. Blaming the cow's low yield on witchcraft gives the "victim" a focal point upon which to direct their anxiety and therein relieve it. If that woman is consorting with the Devil as a means of bewitching the community, her sin is intensified. Similar mythologies existed in Danish church paintings, in other cases depicting a beer-stealing witch who is also aided by a pair of demons.⁸⁴

Evidence of the diabolical aspect of witchcraft as part of popular belief in Denmark emerges primarily from the late fifteenth century onward, but diabolical mythology existed in Scandinavia from as early as the fourteenth century and it is entirely reasonable to presume that the Danes were aware of it. Three Icelandic annals about an incident at a convent at Kirkjubær in 1343 explicitly describe a pact with the Devil. One reads, "A nun was burned at Kirkjubær named Kristin who had dedicated herself in writing to the devil. She had also defiled God's body and thrown it into the privy and had engaged in intercourse with many laymen."⁸⁵ However, not every instance of the diabolical pact was treated with such harsh punishment. An earlier incident in Bergen, where a woman named Ragnhildr was accused of renouncing God and committing herself to the Devil, demonstrates a different temperament. Ragnhildr is sentenced to a lifetime of fasting and obliged to conduct a multiyear pilgrimage outside of Norway. These two cases suggest that the concept of the diabolical pact was present in Scandinavia, although it had not yet been defined as a crime in secular court nor had

⁸⁴ Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic*, 183.

⁸⁵ Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic*, 122.

procedural regulations been set. The severity of punishment was dictated by the local bishop and few seemed concerned with pushing for severe sentences.

The thin line between popular or natural magic and witchcraft was still somewhat ambiguous by the seventeenth century. A cunning woman from Læsø, Kirsten “Pinn” Poulsdatter, was charged with witchcraft at Viborg in 1634. She claimed that taking the “mælklykke” (milk luck) from a man and later returning it was not witchcraft, rather it was part of her abilities as a cunning woman.⁸⁶ A witness who testified against her divulged that she had promised a thousand-fold return from his fields if he gave her some grain. He was upset because his recent harvest was poor, which he blamed on her having crossed his fields. Yet he acknowledged that she had fulfilled her promise during the year in question when his harvest was quite good.⁸⁷ Witnesses testimonies reflected the belief that one person was capable of doing both good and bad, suggesting that she was indeed a cunning person and not a witch. Poulsdatter was convicted on the lesser charge of using “indbildnede konster” (the magic of a cunning person) and sentenced to banishment.⁸⁸ Despite the vague line delineating between cunning folk and witches, the cunning folk made up less than ten percent of the total witchcraft persecutions in Denmark, suggesting that, for the common people, cunning folk were viewed in a significantly different light than witches. Furthermore, from a practical perspective, the benefit of having a cunning person in a community outweighed the potential danger of their presence.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Tangherlini, *How Do You Know*, 285.

⁸⁷ Tangherlini, *How Do You Know*, 285.

⁸⁸ Tangherlini, *How Do You Know*, 285.

⁸⁹ Tangherlini *How Do You Know*, 286.

Age of Lutheran Orthodoxy

By the end of the sixteenth century, the Danish attitude toward witchcraft had developed from a fear of *trolldom* exclusively into a concerted fear of witchcraft, largely due to the Lutheran Church's efforts and the flow of beliefs from Continental Europe. The inclusion of the Devil in witchcraft ideology had developed during the late Middle Ages and quickly became a widespread aspect of Danish popular ideology. As the sixteenth century came to a close the increase in Lutheran influence and the development of witchcraft ideology reached a peak, setting the stage for the intense witchcraft persecutions of the early seventeenth century.

The Age of Lutheran Orthodoxy in Denmark began in 1596 when King Christian IV installed Christian Friis of Borreby as Chancellor.⁹⁰ The ongoing attempt to create a stronger and more centralized state included the Lutheran Church, which bolstered its agenda of eradicating popular beliefs. During this period the positions of power in both secular and ecclesiastical institutions became occupied by Lutheran orthodox individuals. These men were devoted to disciplining and controlling the Danish population, which they believed could be achieved through the same methods they used to persecute practitioners of magic.⁹¹

The early seventeenth century marked a significant departure from the previous approach to magic in Denmark. Although the secular courts had long maintained a separation from both the Catholic and Lutheran churches, Christian IV's 1617 law defined witchcraft as a crime linked with the diabolical pact. This was a rapid turnaround in judicial policy. The King's counselors in Copenhagen had resisted a campaign against witchcraft for years because they

⁹⁰ Louise Nyholm Kallestrup, "Lay and Inquisitorial Witchcraft Prosecutions in Early Modern Italy and Denmark," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 36, No. 3 (July 2011), 267.

⁹¹ Kallestrup, *Lay and Inquisitorial*, 267.

were concerned it might cause the entire legal system to collapse and alienate the Danish people from the courts.⁹² Yet now the system had incorporated popular witchcraft ideology into secular law, deviating from the previous statutes against the use of physically harmful *trolldom*.

There are several explanations for the 1617 Ordinance, and they are by no means mutually exclusive. This shift can be somewhat attributed to the Lutheran church's increasing pressure on Danish authorities to take action against witchcraft. Lutheran clergymen certainly saw the 1617 Ordinance as a battle won in the war against popular magic beliefs. In addition, in 1615 the diocese of Sealand, the most prominent in Denmark, became occupied by Bishop Hans Poulsen Resen, who was more orthodox than his predecessor and had more agency to pursue a campaign against witchcraft. Furthermore, King Christian IV had experience with witchcraft and therefore had a personal motivation to see it eradicated. He seemingly subscribed the perspective espoused by Niels Hemmingsen in his *Admonito*, which claimed that God charged the king with protecting the land from the Devil. Christian IV saw himself as God's knight and the Ordinance reflected his desire to cleanse Denmark of witchcraft's evil influence.

In addition, King Christian IV had a personal belief in witchcraft, stemming from his sister Anne's experience with the witches in Norway. He also had his own interaction with Sami magic users that likely bolstered his belief in the magical arts. In 1599 Christian sailed north towards Vardø, in Finnmark, seeking to rid the area of pirates, inspect the region's conditions, and to show off his fleet to Sweden. The trip included several strange instances, compiled by

⁹² Where was this from again?

Rune Blix Hagen, that likely shaped Christian IV's opinion of witchcraft.⁹³ On the return trip, heading south toward Copenhagen, the fleet was caught in unusual, severe storms that left most of the crew seasick and concerned for their safety. They attempted to curb God's wrath through confession and prayer, but with no success.⁹⁴ The alternative explanation was some ungodly force enacting punishment on them, and their eyes fell on the strange cat one of the crew had stolen from a Sami woman on Kildin. Sivert Grubbe, one of the king's secretaries, recalled how the Sami woman chased after the crewmember in distress, calling for him to return the cat.⁹⁵

The crew members noted that the cat was indeed unusual: its black fur was long and, as the first mate noted, it was much larger than Danish cats. The crew suspected its owner was a Sami sorcerer and the cat was her familiar, which would explain why she was so upset when it was taken from her. On June 17 the crew accused the cat, before the king, of causing their plight.⁹⁶ King Christian spoke in defense of the cat. Apparently, it had amused him by swinging from the ship's rigging and ropes and catching birds from time to time, and the king had grown fond of it. The crew later held an informal trial for the cat, when the king was not present, and found it guilty of causing the storms that plagued their journey. Thus they sentenced the cat to be thrown into the sea to drown by a unanimous vote. Once again, however, Christian

⁹³ Rune Blix Hagen. "The King, The Cat, and the Chaplain: King Christian IV's Encounter with the Sami Shamans of Northern Norway and Northern Russia in 1599." In *Communicating with the Spirits* edited by Gábor Klaniczay and Éva Pócs, 246-263. Plymouth: Central University Press, 2005.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7829/j.ctt2jbnm1.15>

⁹⁴ Blix Hagen, *The King, the Cat, and the Chaplain*, 250.

⁹⁵ Blix Hagen, *The King, the Cat, and the Chaplain*, 251.

⁹⁶ Blix Hagen, *The King, the Cat, and the Chaplain*, 252.

intervened and issued a royal pardon for the cat.⁹⁷ Despite this, the cat was pardoned from drowning and was instead put in a large tub stocked with fish and bread and set afloat on the raging seas. According to the crew members who recorded the story, the next day was beautiful, with a light northern breeze and a favorable wind. The King, based on his secretary's notes, was inclined to believe that freeing the cat pleased Aeolus and Neptune, which explained the shift in weather. Further, he considered the possibility that the cat had returned to the sorceress and she had blessed his reign, during which Denmark-Norway turned into a great power and Christian became the most powerful contemporary monarch.⁹⁸ Although Christian does not seem to have feared the Sami sorceress nor her cat, he certainly believed in her ability to practice magic. Going into the seventeenth century, Christian IV was well acquainted with beneficial and maleficent magic.

Throughout the sixteenth century, the popular magic beliefs developed under the influence of the newly-implemented Lutheran Church, particularly due to the texts published by Hans Tausen, Peder Palladius, and Niels Hemmingsen. Witchcraft ideology gained attributes from Lutheranism, but also from translated witchcraft treatises and stories from Continental Europe. By the advent of the seventeenth-century popular witchcraft belief included the pact with the Devil, the Sabbath, milk or beer stealing, and the general practice of harmful magic. The secular courts, however, remained impervious to popular beliefs – they exclusively pursued cases where an accuser could demonstrate a threat and a physical result of the threat. The popular concept of witchcraft had no bearing on the courts, other than as a motivation for

⁹⁷ Blix Hagen, *The King, the Cat, and the Chaplain*, 255.

⁹⁸ Blix Hagen, *The king, the Cat, and the Chaplain*, 256.

accusations. A marked shift emerged in 1617 when King Christian IV issued his Ordinance Against Witches, which reflected the Lutheran church's growing influence and intertwined popular belief with legislation. The 1617 Ordinance, which will be explored in more detail in the following chapter, is often credited with sparking the rapid increase in witchcraft accusations at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

Chapter 3: The Era of the Witchcraft Trials

The number of witchcraft trials boomed during the early modern period, largely because the Lutheran Orthodoxy had increased strength and had influenced the 1617 Ordinance that was issued on the 100-year anniversary of Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses. The resulting destruction, however, differed from the patterns that emerged during the witchcraft trials in Continental Europe. Denmark did not execute witches on a scale that remotely resembled the pinnacle of executions that took place in Germany. A major factor in this differential was Denmark's modern judicial system, wherein accused witches were protected from the trial tactics that would have doomed them elsewhere. To demonstrate the significance of Denmark's judicial procedures in limiting the number of witchcraft executions, the Danish legal structure will be compared with Germany. The trials that occurred in these two countries lie on opposite ends of the spectrum, in terms of witches executed and legal procedure.

Witchcraft trials in early modern Denmark featured a unique judicial framework due to its strong central government led by King Christian IV. The legal system contained established procedures for prosecuting crimes of an ambiguous nature, including witchcraft, and restricted the use of methods that could contribute to a witch craze. The promulgation of Christian IV's 1617 Ordinance Against Witches elicited a significant increase of witchcraft accusations, resulting in the years 1617 to 1625 representing the height of witchcraft trials in Denmark. Whereas there had been a stable and low number of witch trials each year from 1609 to 1616, a dramatic increase is noted in the following years. In 1616 there were seven trials held in

Jutland, in 1617 the amount rose to eighteen, and then in 1618 there were forty-one trials.⁹⁹ Of the 494 witchcraft trials that took place from 1609 to 1687, 297 of them took place between 1617 and 1625. That is, 60 percent of all the trials in Jutland took place during this eight-year period.¹⁰⁰ Johansen, who compiled these statistics from Viborg County Court records, remarks that “a similar concentration of *maleficium* trials had to my knowledge not been documented from any other European country.”¹⁰¹

The Germanic territories under the Holy Roman Empire’s jurisdiction lacked a strong central government to enforce the *Constitutio Criminalis Carolina*, so local judges were in full control of prosecution and interrogation procedures. Unlike in Denmark, this led to a full-blown witch craze in which more than 23,000 accused witches stood trial. Without legal restrictions to restrain hysteria, the execution rate was astronomical, and Germany became the location of more than half of the witch executions in early modern Europe. This chapter evaluates the different legal frameworks used in Denmark and southern Germany, respectively, to develop an understanding of how judicial procedure restrained or accelerated the witchcraft hunts.

Legal Frameworks in Denmark and Germany

Earlier Danish legislation provided protection for accused witches against unfair trials, which differs from laws directed at witchcraft in other countries. During the revolt against King Christian II, the 1521 outline on inquisitorial procedure was removed, rendering what had been the most threatening piece of legislation null.¹⁰² A law that emerged as part of the 1547

⁹⁹ Johansen, *Denmark*, 346.

¹⁰⁰ Johansen, *Denmark*, 347.

¹⁰¹ Johansen, *Denmark*, 347.

¹⁰² Johansen, *Denmark*, 340.

Copenhagen Articles barred the use of testimonies from dishonest people, including accused or sentenced witches, as evidence in the trial. It also protected against using torture until an accused witch was found guilty.¹⁰³ This legislation prevented single accusations of witchcraft from blossoming into larger witch hunts by decreasing the chances of coerced confession leading to a guilty verdict, and from accused witches naming other members of the community as co-conspirators to assuage prosecutors or get revenge on members of their community. These clauses to the Copenhagen Articles were adopted despite rumors of witchcraft against King Christian III in the early 1540s. Although the clauses were intended as part of a larger effort to control Danish legal procedure their application to witchcraft became instrumental in limiting the scope and severity of witch trials in Denmark.¹⁰⁴

The clause from the Copenhagen Articles of 1547 prohibiting testimony from dishonest people (such as witches and sorcerers), was designed to restrict conviction based on false evidence. It had the inadvertent effect of also preventing the courts from using denunciations against other witches that emerged during trials and confession. It did not, and could not, prevent such denunciations from soiling reputations, but it removed the potential for an endless circle of trial and denunciations that contributed to the widespread hunts in other areas of Europe, for example, Germany. To clarify, the denunciations could lead to cases against the denounced witches, but because reputation alone was not sufficient to find an accused witch guilty, they could not serve as the basis for conviction.¹⁰⁵ A pair of trials that demonstrate how the denouncement's worked are those of Karen Føutin and Bodil Ibsdatter Hoffuens.

¹⁰³ Johansen, *Denmark* 340.

¹⁰⁴ Johansen, *Denmark*, 340.

¹⁰⁵ Kallestrup, *Lay and Inquisitorial*, 271.

Føutin's trial is the earliest identifiable witchcraft trial from Eastern Jutland and was brought to court by the local vassal, Jørgen Skeel, in early spring 1617, before the Ordinance was issued.¹⁰⁶ The accusations against her are unsurprising because she fits into the popular narrative of witches, who at this point were feared for their anger, vengefulness, and wickedness. Føutin had a poor reputation due to suspected witchcraft and claims that she had been "drinking from the Devil's blood and he drank hers."¹⁰⁷ During her post-conviction confession, she provided the names of two other women who were also reputed to be witches, one of whom was Bodil Ibsdatter Hoffuens.¹⁰⁸

A significant number of witnesses volunteered testimony against Bodil. A male villager, Rasmus Jensen, was the first to accuse her of bewitching his cows, although his accusation was muddled. When his cows failed to produce milk he sent for Bodil because her reputation suggested she could control supernatural powers, both for diagnosing and curing bewitchments and for using evil magic. Rasmus claimed that Bodil promised to cure his cows if he paid her with linen but warned him that if he did not pay her she would ensure his cows lost their milk again. Clearly afraid of her power, Rasmus rushed to pay her. He was one of several witnesses who testified about Bodil's influence over their livestock, although most of the other testimonies told of instances when Bodil had healed their livestock, or them, of the effects of witchcraft. Another man testified that Bodil had bewitched his wife, causing her to become "mad and threatening" to the point that she almost killed herself with a knife. After this incident, she had run off and disappeared. Presumably, she returned at some unspecified point,

¹⁰⁶ Kallestrup, *When Hell*, 29.

¹⁰⁷ Kallestrup, *When Hell*, 29.

¹⁰⁸ Kallestrup, *When Hell*, 29.

because she confirmed her husband's testimony, saying she had become "depraved and badly injured" as a result of Bodil's witchcraft.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, Bodil's reputation was confusing. On one hand, her reputation of performing beneficial magic and curing bewitchments was positive, while on the other she appeared threatening due to the insinuation that she could also practice maleficent magic.¹¹⁰ In the end, Bodil was convicted of witchcraft at Viborg and returned home to be executed on the local gallows hill. Her trial is interesting because it demonstrates how denunciation could still lead to a trial, even though it could not serve as evidence. For Bodil, the denouncement emboldened people who had remained silent to voice their accusations against her. She, like Anna Lourups and Birthe Olufsdatter, had no familial support because her husband had run off the moment she was accused. He was later charged with witchcraft.¹¹¹

Similar trials appeared throughout the early seventeenth century. The earlier trial of Maren Nielsdatter of Aalborg, in 1612, resulted in a conviction. When she was questioned about her accomplices during confession, she denounced a woman named Apeloni Ibsdatter. Right before she was pushed into the flames, however, Apeloni withdrew her accusation. Although accusations by convicted witches could not legally lead directly to a trial, and Ibsdatter had withdrawn her denouncement, Apeloni's reputation had been smeared. She had become an easy target for accusations and was convicted of witchcraft in 1619.¹¹²

Article 8 of the Kallundborg Articles further protected against excess in witch hunts through a unique law that differed greatly from other prominent witch trial hotbeds. It

¹⁰⁹ Kallestrup, *When Hell*, 29.

¹¹⁰ Kallestrup, *When Hell*, 29.

¹¹¹ Kallestrup, *When Hell*, 30.

¹¹² Kallestrup, *Lay and Inquisitorial*, 271.

provided witches found guilty by jurors in the lower courts the opportunity for an automatic appeal to the County Courts, reducing the impact of communal bias against the accused.¹¹³ Article 8 likely stemmed from a desire to tighten control on the lower court authorities. One instance, in particular, demonstrates the reasoning behind the automatic appeals process. An accused witch was found guilty in the lower court of Funen in 1570 and sentenced to death. When the case was appealed to the County Court the judges rejected the previous verdict. Unfortunately, this took place after the accused woman had been burned and likely prompted the 1576 clause.¹¹⁴ In the context of the Danish concept of witchcraft, particularly the emphasis on the physical threat to community livelihood, this law allowed accused witches the chance to a trial free from their community members' desire to be rid of a potential threat and the resulting bias. In other European witch trials, the accused often did not have the opportunities afforded by this group of laws, resulting in more convictions and executions.

The arrival and implementation of the October 12, 1617 Ordinance marked a significant shift in Denmark's history of witch trials. For the first time in Denmark, the crime of witchcraft was defined using theological terms, and degrees of punishment outlined. Witches found to have a pact with the Devil were burned at the stake while those found to have used magic, the "cunning men" and "wise women," were fined and exiled from the region.¹¹⁵ Despite including the pact with the Devil in the ordinance prosecutors in the County Courts were not much concerned with that aspect, reflecting the general Danish focus on witches as an economic or social threat. Previously criminal charges of witchcraft were directed at *maleficium*, in cases

¹¹³ Johansen, *Denmark*, 341.

¹¹⁴ Johansen, *Denmark*, 341.

¹¹⁵ Johansen, *Denmark*, 341.

where a victim could point to damages they had suffered because of the witch's magic.¹¹⁶ A person's ability to use magic was not inherently criminal and they were only charged if accused of using their skills to hurt other members of the community.

The new laws were heavily influenced by Lutheran theology and reflected the increasingly strict Lutheran Orthodoxy that dominated Denmark during the seventeenth century. Louise Nyholm Kallestrup sees the 1617 Ordinance then as a triumph for Lutheranism because "practitioners of benevolent magic and divination, referred to as performers of the 'secret arts' (*hemmelige kunster*), were also condemned."¹¹⁷ In the secular Danish courts the Lutherans had gained a legal tool by which to persecute members of the community they believed maintained fundamentally un-Christian practices, a goal they had worked towards for decades.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the 1617 Ordinances was its order for community members to identify witches and bring them to trial. The wording suggested that failing to do so dishonored God and therefore all who wished to appease God should comply. Furthermore, it threatened that an individual who recognized a witch and did not report them would be considered their accomplice and could be brought to court on their own charges.¹¹⁸ This fundamentally altered the relationship between communities and witches because no longer were accusers motivated only by a desire to correct harm they perceived was done to them, as

¹¹⁶ Louise Nyholm Kallestrup. "Knowing Satan From God: Demonic Possession, Witchcraft, and the Lutheran Orthodox Church in Early Modern Denmark." *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 6, No. 2 (Winter 2011): 163-182. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mrw.2011.0020>, 166.

¹¹⁷ Kallestrup, *Knowing Satan*, 166.

¹¹⁸ Kallestrup, *Knowing Satan*, 163.

they had before. Now they had orders from their King to identify potential witches in their community and fear of association with the accused witches as a motivating force to do so.

Accused witches in early-modern Denmark were relatively fortunate that the country had a centralized judicial system that adhered to the legal frameworks on trial procedure. The laws implemented prior to 1617 largely prevented the witch trials in the early seventeenth century from developing into a full-blown frenzy and saved the lives of hundreds of accused witches. Christian IV's 1617 ordinance could have wrought havoc upon Danish localities if it were not for the pre-established statutes, and it was fortunate for would-be witches that local and county courts followed the mandated judicial procedure.

Accused witches in early-modern Germany were not protected by centralized legal precedents, which significantly contributed to the witch frenzy that ravaged the localities of Eichstätt, Würzburg, and Bamberg in the early 1600s. The primary legal framework for inquisitorial procedures was established by Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in 1532. *Constitutio Criminalis Carolina* prohibited using torture unless there was legally sufficient evidence connecting the accused to the crime.¹¹⁹ It further required confessions given under torture be repeated later when the accused was not under duress. In cases where the confession was only given under torture and not later, the judge had to compensate the accused for their pain and injury because the torture was illegal.¹²⁰ Confessions given under torture were legally inadmissible and should not be believed, according to the *Constitutio*. Charles V's regulations

¹¹⁹ John H. Langbein, *Prosecuting Crime in the Renaissance: England, Germany, France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 140.

¹²⁰ Langbein, *Prosecuting Crime*, 140.

were not specific to witchcraft, rather they were part of a larger effort to impose a centralized legal system on territories under the Holy Roman Empire's jurisdiction, including the principalities of southern Germany.

Trial procedure in the semi-autonomous principalities often ignored the laws established by the Holy Roman Emperor and instead developed their own judicial procedures. The fractured makeup of territories technically ruled by the Holy Roman Empire limited its ability to consolidate power and enforce legislation, unlike in Denmark, so there was nothing to prevent local courts from conducting trials as they pleased. The judicial framework local German courts developed is opposite to Denmark's in almost every way.

Danish Accusatorial Procedure

The Danish witchcraft trials were based on an accusatorial, rather than inquisitorial, framework, meaning an accused individual could only be brought to court if there was a supposed victim there to accuse them. As such, the legal system processed the witchcraft accusations much like a civil suit. Unlike in other European witch trials, Danish judges were restricted to considering physical evidence that *maleficium* had taken place, not the accuser's belief that the accused was practicing witchcraft. In most cases, this consisted of a "promise of evil," where the suspected witch threatened the victim with some malicious consequence and physical evidence that the witch had proceeded with the magic.¹²¹

Several cases demonstrate how the strict criteria for convicting an accused witch prevented deaths. A woman named Anne Lundtz, who was found guilty of practicing witchcraft

¹²¹ Kallestrup, *Lay and Inquisitorial*. 272.

by the town court of Skagen. At the local court an abundance of witnesses testified that she practiced maleficent magic, yet when the trial was appealed at Viborg nobody showed up to formally accuse her. Judges therefore chose to dismiss the case due to lack of witnesses or evidence.¹²² Another woman, Mette Poulsdatter, was accused in 1623 of sending an evil spirit into the son of Jacob Nielsen, one of her fellow villagers. Although several members of the community testified that they suspected her as a practitioner of witchcraft, none could remember an instance where she spoke evil words or threatened them. Without sufficient physical or testimonial evidence to find her guilty, Poulsdatter was also acquitted.¹²³

A 1634 case involved an accusation that Chresten Lauridtzen had threatened to cripple a local woman which, in conjunction with his nearly decade-long reputation as a witch, was enough to bring him to the County Court in Viborg. The woman who accused Christen, however, was healthy, married, and had become a mother to two children, indicating he had never bewitched her nor caused her harm. The county judges dismissed the case.¹²⁴ When they could not find sufficient evidence to back up the accuser's claims, they were not motivated to pursue a guilty verdict. The courts' goal was not to discover and punish witches, it was to settle the question of guilt and provide compensation to the victimized party.¹²⁵ This reflects the Danish concept of the witch, particularly the lack of concern for witchcraft itself as a crime and the general focus on how a witch might use their magic for *maleficium* to harm a community.

¹²² Kallestrup, *Lay and Inquisitorial*, 269.

¹²³ Kallestrup, *Lay and Inquisitorial*, 271.

¹²⁴ Kallestrup, *Lay and Inquisitorial*, 272.

¹²⁵ Kallestrup, *Lay and Inquisitorial*, 269.

Witchcraft accusations in Denmark were characterized by economic elements. In nearly half of all recorded cases (735 out of 1,519), the alleged crime was of concern due to its economic impact.¹²⁶ Witness statements included:

271 accusations of murder, 510 of causing human illness, 339 of causing cattle's death, thirty-nine of causing cattle's illness, 104 of stealing or spoiling milk, 157 of killing horses or causing illness, thirty-seven of killing sheep, twenty-seven of killing pigs, twenty-one of ruining beer, and eleven of inflicting poverty.¹²⁷

The church may have been concerned about witches' spiritual threat to the economy, but the secular judicial system cared primarily about the economic impact of *maleficium*. Accusers shared in this focus. They were more concerned about their financial wellbeing than about the diabolical aspect of the witch, unlike in southern Germany.

The trial of Bodild Harchisdatter included a combination of the criteria required to convict a witch. She had found herself under suspicion after her mother, Ingeborg Harchis, denounced her under torture during cross-examination as part of her own witchcraft trial. At the same time, a young boy had accused Bodild of cursing him with illness, causing him to become crippled and bedridden. When Bodild's mother withdrew her denunciation and the boy's deposition was rejected by the court, Bodild was acquitted. Despite this, the seeds of suspicion were sown within the community. In 1614 Bodild was again accused of witchcraft,

¹²⁶ Tangherlini, *How Do You Know*, 283.

¹²⁷ Tangherlini, *How Do You Know*, 283.

this time by the man who had accused her mother and testified as part of the trial that resulted in her execution.¹²⁸

This man, Mads Aschou, had also taken part in Bodild's trial of 1610. He testified that, in the years since the trial, the Harchis family had verbally harassed him on multiple occasions by screaming and yelling at him in public. After he formally accused her, several witnesses came forward to confirm her status as a witch. One witness, Hans Sveirgfieger, claimed that Bodil had entered his house uninvited to ask for something, which he refused to give her. A few days later she briefly returned to his home, watched him as he brewed some beer, and left without saying anything. As soon as she left, however, the yeast stopped working and the brew filled with bubbles, ruining it. Although she made no verbal threats, Sveirgfieger was certain she had been the cause of his beer's demise.¹²⁹ According to Niels Knivsmid, a further witness, Bodild had also entered his house without permission and whenever she did an accident occurred. Her presence was enough to terrify his wife, child, and maid.¹³⁰ Bodild had a reputation for entering people's homes uninvited, which created a negative perception of her as a rude woman. Furthermore, once she was accused in 1610 of witchcraft her reputation was soiled, even though she had been acquitted. Therefore, she was at risk of being accused again, because she was vulnerable. Indeed, the same man who accused her before accused her again, potentially

¹²⁸ Louise Nyholm Kallestrup, "Women, Witches, and the Town Courts of Ribe: Ideas of the Gendered Witch in Early Modern Denmark," in *Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. Marianna G. Muravyeva and Raisa Maria Tovio (New York: Routledge, 2013), 124-125.

¹²⁹ Kallestrup, *Women*, 125.

¹³⁰ Kallestrup, *Women*, 125.

as a way of striking back at her for the harassment he allegedly suffered at the hands of her family.

In some cases, accusations of witchcraft were used as a means of boosting one's own reputation, particularly for individuals who had developed a negative reputation themselves. The 1613 trial of Anna Lourups demonstrates this phenomenon. She had been accused by Oluf Andersen Klokke of bewitching him into madness. He claimed that, a few years prior, Lourups had come to visit him with the intention of "telling him something," but Klokke refused to speak with him unless she entered his living room.¹³¹ She refused and promptly departed, leaving her cloak and cap behind, which he threw into the street after her. Evidence suggests he must have grabbed her before she left because there is little other explanation for why she would have taken off her cloak or cap. Later that day she allegedly threatened him, saying that "since he beats his wife, he should not live for long."¹³² The more recent motivation for Klokke's accusation was the evil words Lourups spoke to him, causing him to temporarily go mad and attempt to kill himself by jumping from the church roof. Witnesses testified that Klokke's wife was also ill and a number of people testified against Lourups.¹³³

Jesper Sørensen Guldsmid testified that Lourups had entered his house to ask for yeast, but he refused to give it to her and later found his own beer spoiled. He had also seen her sneaking around outside scullery, and soon after his wife lost her hearing. Another witness, Maren Olufs, recalled an instance when her young daughter was singing a hymn early one

¹³¹ Kallestrup, *Women*, 125.

¹³² Kallestrup, *Women*, 125.

¹³³ Kallestrup, *Women*, 126.

morning. Lourups came to complain that, “your daughter woke me up this morning, but I will make sure to spank her before evening, so that the devil will not do so.”¹³⁴ Although it was somewhat common for members of a community to discipline someone else’s child, it could be seen as a sign of disrespect toward a housewife and the master of the house. Olufs claimed she had told Lourups she would discipline the child herself, but Lourups still managed to get ahold of her and beat her so hard she required bandages. This certainly shed a negative light on Lourups, for her actions had indeed been interpreted as disrespectful. Furthermore, she beat the child for singing a hymn that praised God, which only made the situation worse.¹³⁵ Anna Lourups had a negative reputation within her community and was an easy target for witchcraft accusations.

Oluf Klokker probably understood the vulnerable state Lourups was in and saw an opportunity to help his own reputation. He was known for abusing women, fighting with other members of the community, and smashing windows. In 1618, in fact, he was threatened with the death penalty for assaulting a group of women, hurling stones at people, and repeatedly participating in violent brawls.¹³⁶ He saw witchcraft accusations as a means of bettering his reputation and took the opportunity to accuse Anna.

Anna Lourups was not the only woman Klokker accused in an attempt to improve his community reputation. In 1620 he accused an old widowed woman, Birthe Olfusdatter, of practicing witchcraft. She already had a reputation for witchcraft and she was feared by many

¹³⁴ Kallestrup, *Women*, 127.

¹³⁵ Kallestrup, *Women*, 127.

¹³⁶ Kallestrup, *Women*, 127.

people in the community. Part of Birthe's negative reputation was tied to her daughter, who also had a negative reputation and had been banished from Ribe several times in the past. Klokke preyed on her bad reputation and found her an easy target for an accusation. Neither Lourups and Olufsdatter were married, Lourups never having been and Olufsdatter a widow, so they lacked the protection of a husband. Furthermore, by never marrying nor remarrying, the women defied the common practice of Danish villages and therefore stood out from their peers.¹³⁷ Klokke correctly assumed they would be easy to bring to trial and the community would likely provide multiple witnesses who would testify to their evil deeds.

In some cases, witchcraft accusations were used to rid a community of economic competitors, especially among the cunning folk. Birthe Jensen, whose business developed quickly after she purchased "den kloge mands bog" (the cunning man's book), began to face disgruntled customers who believed she had cheated them.¹³⁸ Another cunning man from the community saw an opportunity to use her declining reputation as a means of eliminating a competitor, so he began suggesting that she was a witch. Another local cunning woman who was less successful than Jensen joined in. Soon after, Jensen found herself the subject of a witch hunt intended to oust her from the community.¹³⁹ While some individuals put forth accusations to improve their social reputation, others were economically motivated to rid their communities of competition.

¹³⁷ Kallestrup, *Women*, 127.

¹³⁸ Tangherlini, *How Do You Know*, 289.

¹³⁹ Tangherlini, *How Do You Know*, 289.

Accusations Without Trials

For several reasons, not all accusations of witchcraft in Denmark emerged as trials. One reason is due to the trial requirement that a victim is present to formally accuse the witch, both in local courts and when moved up to the County courts. Accusers were required to place their hands on the alleged witch's head and say, "I hereby accuse you of being a true witch."¹⁴⁰ There are several cases where the local jury found an accused witch guilty but when the verdict was appealed in the County court the accuser did not appear. In this scenario the judge was inclined to throw out the case and reverse the verdict, declaring the accused witch not guilty.¹⁴¹ Such was the case during the trial of Anne Lundtz of the Skaw. Although multiple witnesses claimed they were victims of her *maleficium*, and she was sentenced by the local courts, when the trial made its way to Viborg no witnesses appeared to reiterate their experience.¹⁴² The fact that witchcraft accusations were often abandoned when they were sent to the County courts suggests that accusers were not willing to pursue the charges, perhaps because they were not entirely convinced themselves that witchcraft posed a threat to them.

Witchcraft victims also may not have been eager to take the supposed witches to trial because of the cost involved. Just as in modern civil suits, the loser was responsible for all court fees accrued throughout the trial and, for the poor Danes who provided the accusations, this was a risk.¹⁴³ For many would-be accusers, the desire to gain compensation for damages presumably caused by *malifcium* did not make up for the financial risk involved. Obtaining a

¹⁴⁰ Kallestrup, *Lay and Inquisitorial*, 269.

¹⁴¹ Kallestrup, *Lay and Inquisitorial*, 269.

¹⁴² Kallestrup, *Lay and Inquisitorial*, 269.

¹⁴³ Kallestrup, *Lay and Inquisitorial*, 270.

guilty verdict was no easy task due to the procedural restrictions, so the chance of an alleged victim being left with responsibility for court fees was high. Another possibility was that the victims themselves were unsure whether *maleficium* was at hand and lacked the motivation to see the trial through.

Judges were also liable to dismiss cases where they found unreliable evidence or witnesses. This includes lack of evidence to prove *maleficium* had indeed been performed, but primarily refers to the rare cases involving demonic possession. Cases involving demonic possession are relatively few, likely because the diabolical aspect of witchcraft was not an important part of Denmark's witch concept. The pact with the Devil usually came up in post-verdict confessions and was rarely part of the initial accusation.¹⁴⁴ Trial documents preserved at Viborg reveal that when demonic possession appeared in testimony it was not used as evidence. Although the courts were secular, provincial judges used a theological argument to omit possession as a piece of evidence. They believed demonic possession meant the person's body had been completely taken over by a demon or devil, so therefore any words spoken by the victim were the words of the Devil.¹⁴⁵ Testimony from that individual was therefore unreliable. The courts refused to allow possessed individuals to testify and largely ignored them. Demonic possession was of little concern to judges and clerics because the Danish church could not perform exorcisms.¹⁴⁶ By the time demonic possession became an aspect of

¹⁴⁴ Kallestrup, *Knowing Satan*, 168.

¹⁴⁵ Kallestrup, *Knowing Satan*, 170.

¹⁴⁶ Kallestrup, *Knowing Satan*, 170.

witchcraft accusations in the late 1630s, the height of the witch trials in Denmark was over and courts were less concerned with the crime.

The most notable case involving demonic possession occurred at Rosborg in 1639, when Captain Niels Munk accused Anders Christensen and Mette Pedersdatter of sending demons into the bodies of his two oldest children.¹⁴⁷ Munk had previously initiated a widespread witch hunt in Rosborg, during which Anders and Mette had been accused. The bishop of Viborg, Hands Wandal, visited Munk and his children to examine them for signs of a demonic presence. Wandal included a physician in his examination, questioned Munk's daughter about her faith, and separated the two children. He went about his investigation in a practical manner, never allowing fear of witches or the devil to shape the process.¹⁴⁸ He did not overreact, nor did he encourage the prosecution of the alleged witches. This suggests that Wandal, and perhaps the clergy in general, was not concerned with demonic possession.

German Inquisitorial Procedure

Witchcraft trials in southern Germany were characterized by the court's use of the inquisitorial procedure, as opposed to Denmark's accusatorial system.¹⁴⁹ The courts did not mediate civil disputes between a victim and the accused in order to remedy the situation through financial compensation, instead the courts intended to find and punish witches they believed hid within the community. Bear in mind these courts were secular, although the church certainly played a large role in developing Germany's diabolical concept of witchcraft, in

¹⁴⁷ Kallestrup, *Knowing Satan*, 171.

¹⁴⁸ Kallestrup, *Knowing Satan*, 174.

¹⁴⁹ Anne Llewellyn Barstow, *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), 49.

establishing legal procedures, and in encouraging increased prosecution of witches. Secular courts took over prosecution of witchcraft accusations because, just as in Denmark, the crime was seen as a form of treason and threat to the community. Unlike in Denmark, however, the act of witchcraft itself was the crime, not just using magic to cause *maleficium*.¹⁵⁰ There was no requirement of a threat and evidence the threat had manifested; the only criteria necessary was an accusation.

Courts practiced the use of secret sessions, withholding the accuser's identity, denying counsel, accepting evidence from unreliable or biased sources, denial of cross-examination, and presumptions of guilt, all of which diametrically oppose the process used in Denmark.¹⁵¹ They justified using these procedures by emphasizing the threat witches posed to German society, even though many cases lacked physical evidence of any threats. The most significant aspect of German witchcraft trials was the use of torture and interrogation as the primary judicial tool, as a means to elicit confessions and discover the witch's accomplices. Denmark used torture after witches had been found guilty, with the intent of saving their soul. Germany used torture to confirm presumptions of guilt, to gather information about witches' actions, and because the court judges believed torture could help free the witch from the Devil's grasp, thereby saving her soul.¹⁵² The latter is similar to Denmark's reasoning, but the previous two practices were part of the court's agenda, which was to find, prosecute, and execute witches.

¹⁵⁰ Barstow, *Witchcraze*, 49.

¹⁵¹ Barstow, *Witchcraze*, 49.

¹⁵² Lyndal Roper, "Interrogation and Torture," In *Witch Craze: Women and Evil in Baroque Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 45.

Confessions were the primary evidence in German witchcraft trials and torture was the most efficient way to evoke them, so it became the most powerful tool in an interrogator's arsenal.¹⁵³ Judges in southern Germany believed witchcraft was a crime that could not be witnessed by non-witches because only witches were present during flying, sabbath, diabolical dances, and sex with the Devil. Other actions, such as spreading poison or disease, were done in secret and the only evidence was the results, so guilt could only be assumed and not confirmed.¹⁵⁴ Therefore the only way to prove the witch was guilty was for him/her to confess. Torture had to be applied consistently because interrogators believed the Devil could impart strength into the witch, allowing them to withstand pain that would incapacitate regular people.¹⁵⁵

Barbara Stecher was interrogated in Nördlingen in 1590 and offered small confessions yet denied them in subsequent sessions. Interrogators attributed the Devil's influence to Stecher's ability to resist confessing under torture. Throughout her ordeal, she asked repeatedly for a day's grace between interrogations, which seemingly gave the Devil time to heal her. Interrogators upgraded her torture to include the use of the boots, thumbscrews, and the bench.¹⁵⁶ After a two-week reprieve, Stecher confessed to killing three children but denied it under torture. This pattern continued and Stecher suffered through an intense period of torture until she finally confessed, in her fifteenth interrogation session, that she had been seduced by the Devil.¹⁵⁷ At this point, she gave interrogators what they desired all along, a full

¹⁵³ Roper, *Interrogation*, 47.

¹⁵⁴ Roper, *Interrogation*, 47.

¹⁵⁵ Roper, *Interrogation*, 47.

¹⁵⁶ Roper, *Interrogation*, 47.

¹⁵⁷ Roper, *Interrogation*, 48.

explanation of how she came to be the Devil's lover and her experience as a witch.

Interrogators found that daily torture and alternating torture methods were most effective for producing a satisfactory confession.¹⁵⁸

Interrogators were aware that false confessions could emerge from torture, so witches had to tell a convincing story if they wanted the suffering to end. The most convincing stories included from everyday life and vivid descriptions of the Devil, specifically information nobody else could know. Gertrauta Conrad, an accused witch from Ober Wittighausen, was tortured in 1509. She described the Devil's appearance, his orders to her, where she kept his money, and even his sexual organ. It took several sessions for her to produce a satisfactory story.¹⁵⁹ During her earlier interrogations she seemed lost for words and asked the interrogator to read her Apollonia Crafft's confession, so she might confess the same.¹⁶⁰ It took multiple torture sessions to elicit an acceptable confession from her because she needed time to construct a distinct story, not, as the interrogators believed, because torture eventually succeeded in loosening the Devil's hold which allowed her to tell the truth.¹⁶¹

Once an accused witch had provided a sufficient confession, usually including a list of co-conspirators, he or she was sentenced to death by burning at the stake. After weeks of sadistic torture, the witches likely welcomed the escape of death, for at least then they would suffer no longer. The executions themselves were a public spectacle intended to demonstrate

¹⁵⁸ Roper, *Interrogation*, 48.

¹⁵⁹ Roper, *Interrogation*, 44.

¹⁶⁰ Roper, *Interrogation*, 45.

¹⁶¹ Roper, *Interrogation*, 45.

the court's power in finding and purging witches from the community and also to dissuade others from following in the witches' footsteps.

Executions were a mainstay of the witch trials in Germany, designed to demonstrate to the rest of the community the judge's power over the Devil and his servants. Unlike in Denmark, where the law required appeals in guilty verdicts and categorized punishment based on the level of *maleficium*, accused witches in Germany little chance to escape a guilty verdict and the only punishment was execution. In Denmark, executions were done by strangling the witch before burning their body, while in Germany witches were burned alive. The entire trial process in Germany was a sadistic affair, where accused witches were tortured until they confessed and then tortured further during their execution. So great was the hysteria surrounding Germany's witch craze that massive crowds formed to spectate and celebrate the carnage.

Denmark and Germany used opposing legal frameworks to find, prosecute, and punish witches. The primary difference was not so much that one country had laws defining the judicial procedure and the other did not, instead they are mostly differentiated by the strength of the central government in upholding the laws. Denmark had by this time developed a system with several layers of government that supervised the court systems throughout the country, ensuring that local court systems followed procedure. As an added safety net, convictions at the lower courts were automatically appealed to county courts, where the trial would not be subject to the bias present in courts where the judge and jury were all members of the community. Prosecutors were not allowed to use torture to get a confession, nor could they accept evidence from unreliable witnesses, and accusations could only be brought to trial when

there was a threat of *maleficium* and evidence the threat had manifested. These rules prevented witchcraft hysteria from breaking out.

The Germanic territories, however, were not unified and conducted their judicial affairs semi-autonomously. They were supposed to follow the procedure set forth by Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, but the empire's government did not have the means to enforce the use of the procedures throughout the principalities. Local judges and interrogators had free reign to use torture as a means of confession, rely on evidence from criminals, including convicted witches, and did not offer the chance for convicted witches to appeal their case. The system was susceptible to chain reactions in which an accused witch confessed under torture and named accomplices, who were also tortured until they did the same. This created an atmosphere where anyone could be accused of witchcraft and no evidence was needed to convict them. The resulting witch craze in southern Germany was, therefore, more intense and widespread than in Denmark and resulted in far more executions.

Chapter 4: The Decline of Witchcraft Trials

Denmark experienced a significant surge in witchcraft trials at the beginning of the seventeenth century, following Christian IV's Ordinance. This period emerged as the result of several factors that combined to create an environment ideal for witchcraft accusations, albeit not for convictions. The Lutheran Church had finally succeeded in their century-long quest to define witchcraft, particularly the diabolical aspect, as a crime, represented by the 1617 Ordinance. Meanwhile, the popular magic beliefs had been influenced by the writings of the Lutheran clergy, such as Peder Palladius and Niels Hemmingsen, and also intermingled with witchcraft ideology transported from Continental Europe. These two factors helped lead to an increase in witchcraft accusations. Yet, just as quickly, accusations of witchcraft declined in the second half of the seventeenth century.

After 1650 the number of witchcraft convictions dropped significantly. Conviction rates of 70 percent in the early seventeenth century dropped to 37 percent from 1656-97.¹⁶² The Viborg Landsting, where the majority of witchcraft trials in Jutland took place earlier, received only two or three cases regarding witchcraft each year. Judges were also less inclined to issue convictions because they had grown skeptical of witchcraft, along with many of the Danish elite.¹⁶³ Villum Lange, a Professor of Mathematics at the University of Copenhagen and Jutland County Court Judge, wrote to Peder Schumacher, a prominent Danish statesman, observing:

During the past few days we have had a crown of women brought before us, accused of sorcery. We have condemned a number of them to the stake; but because they are so foolish and simple-minded we have recommended to the court that the case should first be brought before His Majesty for appeal...One of them confessed to us herself that she had

¹⁶² Ankarloo and Clark, *Witchcraft*, 68.

¹⁶³ Gustav Henningsen, "Witchcraft in Denmark," *Folklore* 93, No. 2 (1982) 136.

talked with the devil; but whether it was melancholia or some other form of fantasy, or was the honest truth, God alone knows. To me she appeared to be a person in her second childhood.¹⁶⁴

Lange's 1670 remark indicates a decline in popular witchcraft ideology, at least among the elite class, resulting in a decrease of convictions. He mentions that the court ultimately convicted the accused women, but he is also inclined to write on their behalf. His recipient, Peder Schumacher, is telling of his belief. Schumacher, later named Griffenfeldt, was a powerful advisor to King Christian V and would later become the Chancellor of Denmark. Unlike in the time of Christian IV, the Danish elites did not seem concerned with witchcraft nor were they interested in perpetuating the witchcraft trials.

Although skepticism emerged among the Danish upper class and academic elites, the common people adjusted at a slower rate. It was from the lower class that the witchcraft trials first emerged, as a result of the accusations raised in their communities. The witchcraft trials in Denmark, as previously discussed, came from the bottom and were mostly suppressed by the upper class and the courts, with the exception of a few laws or ordinances that threatened to bolster accusations. As the seventeenth century progressed and the upper classes began to grow skeptical, the lower classes were unable to pursue accusations because the accused was more likely to be acquitted. So, while the ideology remained, the consequences dwindled. The lower classes, therefore, began to criticize the courts for failing to sustain convictions and accused them of siding with the witches and sorcerers.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Henningsen, *Witchcraft*, 136.

¹⁶⁵ Henningsen, *Witchcraft*, 136.

Another explanation for the rapid decline in witchcraft accusations is the decrease in eligible people to accuse. As mentioned previously, it took many years to develop a reputation as a witch. The surge in accusations from 1617 to 1625 included the majority of individuals with negative reputations and, in the following years, there was not enough time for potential witches to build up a reputation sufficient to result in accusations. By the time an individual could have developed a reputation as a witch, the trials had passed and increased skepticism decreased the opportunity for them to see trial.

From 1656 to 1686 there was only one witch sentenced to death in Jutland. Then, in 1686, there was a small cluster of twelve trials, resulting in four convictions and death sentences. In a vein similar to what happened in Germany, a single witch-hunter had a hand in all the trials. The trials connected to Jørgen Arenfeld of Rugård in Djursland were remarkably similar to those found in Continental Europe, for the prosecutors employed the tactics of pricking and swimming the witches.¹⁶⁶ Arenfeld might have succeeded in reviving the witchcraft trials with his uncharacteristic tactics, but his overzealous attempt to persecute more witches caused his system to collapse.¹⁶⁷

A woman named Anne Sørensdatter was sentenced at Rugård in May 1686 and her sentence was confirmed by the Jutland County Court. During her confession at Rugård, Sørensdatter had named several wealthy citizens of Århus and Grenå as fellow witches. Five days after her County Court sentence she retracted her denouncements in front of Arenfeld, an assessor from Århus, and the minister from Tvillum, claiming she was not acquainted with the

¹⁶⁶ Johansen, *Denmark*, 349.

¹⁶⁷ Johansen, *Denmark*, 350.

people she had denounced in any way. Her case was now brought before the Supreme Court, unfortunately for Arenfeld. In September 1686 the Supreme Court gave her a reprieve from the stake and condemned her to a public whipping and banishment for her false statements. The Court also determined that Arenfeld had abused his power in arresting Sørensdatter because she did not live within his jurisdiction. Eventually, Arenfeld was suspended from his district court.¹⁶⁸

It is likely that the trials from Rugård motivated the 1686 legislation stipulating that all convictions at the County Court had to be appealed to the Supreme Court.¹⁶⁹ This law served as perhaps a relatively unnecessary precaution. Throughout the seventeenth century the County Courts acquitted slightly less than 50 percent of all convictions from the lower courts, and from 1626 to 1656 the acquittal rate rose as high as 70 percent.¹⁷⁰ Ensuring that the few convictions that made their way through the County Court had to stand in the Supreme Court drastically decreased the chance that an accused witch would be found guilty in the end. It also served to increase the commitment necessary for an accuser, perhaps subduing potential accusations.

Although the period of witchcraft trials in Denmark is usually confined to the seventeenth century, there were a myriad of accusations and trials in the following decades. When Christen Tordahl's horse grew sick and began to die on November 24, 1722, he immediately suspected who was to blame. As soon as the horse died he went to find Dorte Jensdatter, a middle-aged woman who lived alone and made money spinning for members of

¹⁶⁸ Johansen, *Denmark*, 350.

¹⁶⁹ Johansen, *Denmark*, 342.

¹⁷⁰ Johansen, *Denmark*, 350.

the Øster Grønning community in Salling.¹⁷¹ Dorte was rumored to be a witch and had been blamed for the deaths of various livestock over the last several years. Tordahl would join Mads Christensen and Peder Thatcher in blaming her for his misfortune. Notably, the previous animals died the same evening Jensdatter had been spinning in the family's house, suggesting her connection to their demise.¹⁷² The evening after Tordahl's horse died, the group of those suspicious of Jensdatter met with her and interrogated her about her involvement in the deaths of their animals. She denied any involvement, although, according to Christen Tordahl and his wife, she admitted to causing Peder Thatcher's child to weaken and die.¹⁷³ Thatcher and his wife did not recall her saying so when questioned by the court, so it is ambiguous whether she actually confessed.

The interrogation intensified when Christen Tordahl moved the group to Jensdatter's home. He and Laurs Nielsen tied her to a post to ensure she could not flee during the night because they were taking her in front of the squire the next morning. Tordahl, upset about his horse, began to swing an oil lamp in her face, then set a handful of straw on fire and threw it to the floor. The other members of the group told him to stop, but Karen Thatcher added sooty straw to the fire and spread it to Jensdatter's clothes. When a drunk Mads Christensen arrived the scene only grew crazier, as he yelled, "If she can't burn any other way she must be burned in the name of Death and the Devil!"¹⁷⁴ While Nielsen tried to put out the fire and shouted that they must save Jensdatter from the flames, Thatcher continued to add straw to the blaze until it

¹⁷¹ Gustav Henningsen, *Witch Persecution After the Era of the Witch Trials: A Contribution to Danish Ethnohistory* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1988) 170.

¹⁷² Henningsen, *Persecution*, 170.

¹⁷³ Henningsen, *Persecution*, 171.

¹⁷⁴ Henningsen, *Persecution*, 172.

grew so intense that everyone had to run from the house. A half hour later the house was nothing but a pile of ashes and Jensdatter was dead.¹⁷⁵

There are no details in the story of Dorte Jenndatter that suggest the people of Øster Grønning did not trust the court system, in fact, they were initially planning to bring her in front of the squire for punishment. Nevertheless, she was not afforded the opportunity to stand trial because, in their craze, the group murdered her. The ten participants were brought before the High Court in Viborg, where Christen Tordahl and Karen Thatcher were condemned to be beheaded and “their bodies thereafter thrown into the flames and burned.”¹⁷⁶ Laurs Nielsen was outlawed and Mads Christensen sentenced to public penance, while the other six were acquitted. Throughout the country, the upper-class clergymen and judges condemned the murder, while the common people tended to side with the criminals. The vestiges of witchcraft belief were still strong among the lower classes and they supported the group from Øster Grønning, who they saw as unfairly punished.

The murder of Dorte Jenndatter is significant as a representation of popular witchcraft beliefs in the post witch trial era, especially as one that displays the lower-class attitude toward witches and their growing distrust of the courts. She was not the only suspected witch killed by vigilantes who took the law into their own hands when they believed the secular courts were not doing enough to put an end to witchcraft. In 1700 letter from Pastor Johannes Boetius to the Duke of Sønderjylland, the pastor sought advice on dealing with a sick woman who believed another woman had bewitched her.¹⁷⁷ The night after the minister denied the request, the

¹⁷⁵ Henningsen, *Persecution*, 172.

¹⁷⁶ Henningsen, *Persecution*, 173.

¹⁷⁷ i.e. Southern Jutland.

suspected witch was dragged from her house and delivered to the sick woman, who beat her and threatened her unless she “repaired the evil she has done with good.”¹⁷⁸ Through the remainder of the eighteenth century there were many incidents of vigilante violence against suspected witches, suggesting that the common people of Denmark had retained their popular witchcraft beliefs.

Gustav Henningsen notes the continued belief in witches in Denmark as recently as the 1960s. One woman he converses with tells him that, “we used to have a witch here in our town. His name was N. Mothers would not venture out without putting bread and salt in the pram, for if he happened to look at the child and there was none there, the child would fall ill.”¹⁷⁹ According to the woman and her sister, the man owned a book called *Cyprianus* and had to pass it on to someone else before he died.¹⁸⁰ They said he had reputedly passed it on to another individual in their community. Henningsen’s conversation with the women demonstrates that, more than three centuries after the peak of the Danish witchcraft trials, there is still a persisting belief in the existence of witches in Danish communities. These women not only believe a witch lives among them, but they also take precautions to prevent themselves from falling victim to his magic. The last murder of a suspected witch occurred in 1800 in Brigsted, but the popular beliefs made their way into the twentieth century, albeit without the violent pushback.

¹⁷⁸ Henningsen, *Persecution*, 179.

¹⁷⁹ Pram = stroller; Henningsen, *Witchcraft*, 131.

¹⁸⁰ Henningsen, *Witchcraft*, 131; The *Cyprianus* is a black book containing spells, a *grimoire*.

Conclusion

Denmark's journey toward the witchcraft trials of the seventeenth century took more than eight centuries. Magic had long been a mundane part of Danish life, ever since the Viking Age, and during the Middle Ages perceptions of popular magic began to change due to the influence of Catholic ideology. Yet, for most Danes, magic did not represent an inherent threat to their communities. They had lived alongside cunning folk for generations and valued their skills with magic, which were utilized to cure disease, protect crops and livestock, and ensure good fortune fell upon the community. Magic was first and foremost a tool and, while it could be used to maleficent purposes, its primary use was beneficial. From a practical standpoint, Danes were not inclined to persecute magic users because the benefits of magic outweighed the risks. Magic also had a social function. In Denmark, where the majority of people subscribed to a magical worldview, magic offered an explanation for forces outside of their control and allowed them to feel they had the power to conduct change in the world. Blaming maleficent magic for a poor crop yield reduced anxiety in a way that blaming drought could not.

The Catholic missionaries and clergy who arrived in Denmark during the Middle Ages attempted to undermine popular magic beliefs and replace them with Christian ideology. At first, they tried to paint magic as tied to the Devil and claimed it was an evil art but, when that did not work very well, they settled for intermingling Catholic belief and popular magic. While this did not much shift attitudes toward magic among the average Dane, it did help perpetuate popular magic throughout the Middle Ages. During this period there was certainly an increased concern about malicious magic among clergy and legislators, reflected in the promulgation of both secular and ecclesiastical laws against *trolldom*.

When the Lutheran Church arrived in 1536 with the goal of indoctrinating the population, the clergy began a more aggressive campaign against popular magic than the Catholic clergy had. Their legal influence was restrained, however, by the separation between church law and secular law. The Lutheran clergy was relegated to publishing treatises that spoke out against magic, and they deliberately defined all magic as witchcraft, and witchcraft as tied to the devil. The writings of Niels Henningsen and Peder Palladius were translated into Danish from Latin and had a significant influence on the developing concept of the witch in Denmark. While the Lutheran influence played a significant role in shaping Danish witchcraft ideology, that was ultimately their most prominent involvement in the witchcraft trials.

The Lutheran Orthodoxy achieved a symbolic success in the form of King Christian IV's Ordinance of 1617, where witchcraft was explicitly defined as a crime based on the diabolical pact. Yet, despite the fact that Denmark had developed a fully-formed concept of witchcraft, including the diabolical pact and the Sabbath, witchcraft belief never emerged as a key aspect of the trials. This was because the secular courts maintained a practical set of criteria for bringing an accused witch to trial, the most important of which was a direct threat of *maleficium* and physical evidence that the threat had manifested. A suspected witch could not face trial on the basis of reputation alone, and most Danes were ill-inclined to accuse someone if they had not been physically or economically harmed by them. Although there was a massive increase in witchcraft accusations and trials in the eight years following the 1617 Ordinance, the resulting carnage was limited by preexisting statutes and ordinances that protected accused witches from testimony by unreliable witnesses, hearsay, and torture.

Of utmost importance was Denmark's law that required all convictions at lower courts to be appealed at the County Courts, where an accused witch would be tried by a jury that lacked the negative perception their community likely held. This law saved more than fifty percent of witches convicted at the lower courts. In part, this was due to the financial risk involved because, if the witch was acquitted, then the accuser was saddled with the trial fees. As a result, many accusers chose to let the case go if it was appealed to the higher courts. In addition, many Danes were happy to settle their conflicts out of court and agreed to let the matter go if the witch repaid them for the damages they suffered. Judges did not have the power nor the inclination to pursue cases against witches when there was insufficient evidence, because the procedure was entirely accusatorial. Without cooperation from the common people, the trials could not go on. Most Danes saw magic and witchcraft from a practical standpoint and were not overly concerned with witchcraft unless they had been directly impacted by harmful magic. They did not seem to care whether someone practiced magic, even if it came from the Devil, as long as it was not directed against them. As a result, the witchcraft trials, which had the potential to be far more devastating, were limited in scope.

Ultimately, Denmark could have been the scene of widespread witch hunts if the common people had been inclined to see magic as inherently evil and dangerous. That was not the case. Without sufficient fear of witchcraft, the population did not rouse itself into hysteria and, when accusations did surge, the legal structure enforced by a strong government protected accused witches from execution unless there was significant evidence pointing to their guilt. The secular court system, which was definitively isolated from theological influence, exhibited a progressive perspective toward dealing with witchcraft, unlike the inquisitorial

system in Germany. These practical laws, designed to prevent baseless convictions, should receive the bulk of credit in an explanation of why the Danish witchcraft trials did not result in widespread devastation.

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