CONTRA SAGAS

EARLY MODERN WITCH TRIALS IN THE HABSBURG MONARCHY

(16TH - 18TH CENTURIES)

BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

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BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

MATICA HRVATSKA, ZAGREB

13–14 October 2026

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ABOUT



The international conference CONTRA SAGAS – Early Modern Witch Trials in the Habsburg Monarchy (16th–18th Centuries), held in Zagreb on 13–14 October 2026 brings together scholars from eight countries whose research explores witchcraft trials and related phenomena across the diverse territories of the Habsburg Monarchy. As the first international conference in Croatia devoted specifically to this subject, CONTRA SAGAS seeks to provide a forum for presenting new research, exchanging methodological perspectives, and fostering closer cooperation among scholars working in different national and historiographical traditions.

The history of witchcraft persecution in the Habsburg lands cannot be adequately understood within the boundaries of individual modern states. Although the territories under Habsburg rule shared certain political, legal, religious, and administrative background, though the chronology, scale, judicial practices, and social dynamics of witchcraft prosecution varied considerably from one region to another. Local courts, municipal authorities, noble estates, ecclesiastical institutions, central governments, and rural and urban communities all participated – although not always in the same manner or to the same extent – in defining, prosecuting, and suppressing magical offences. The resulting diversity calls for approaches that combine detailed regional research with broader comparative analysis. One of the principal aims of the conference is to encourage dialogue between scientific traditions that have often developed separately because of linguistic, disciplinary, and national boundaries.

The abstracts in this booklet, address a wide range of interconnected subjects which are discussed at the conference: regional patterns and local specificities of witchcraft prosecution; legal procedures and institutional frameworks; religious and demonological discourses; gender, social marginality, and constructions of deviance; the political and socioeconomic circumstances of individual trials; collective fears, emotions, and community conflicts; and newly discovered or insufficiently studied archival sources. Together, they demonstrate the value of integrating legal, social, cultural, religious, and microhistorical perspectives in the study of early modern witch trials.

We are grateful to all speakers, chairs, institutional partners, and supporters whose work and commitment have made this conference possible.

PROGRAMME

CONTRA SAGAS

CONFERENCE PROGRAMME
CONTRA SAGAS
Early Modern Witch Trials in the Habsburg Monarchy (16th – 18th Centuries)
Zagreb, 13–14 October 2026

DAY 1

Tuesday, 13 October 2026

9:15 – 9:45 – Opening of the Conference

9:45 – 11:20 – Keynote session (chair: Deniver Vukelić)
9:45 – 10:30 – Rita Voltmer: War on the Witches' Dark Counter-State? The Structure of Witch-Hunting in the Spanish-Habsburg Lands and Their Border Regions
10:35 – 11:20 – Gábor Klaniczay: Habsburg Monarchy: Catalyzer or Moderator of Witch Trials in Hungary?

11:20 – 12:00 – Coffee break

12:00 – 13:45 – First session (chair: Blanka Szeghyová)
12:00 – 12:35 – Ildikó Sz. Kristóf: The Guild of Midwives: Historians' Myth or Social History
12:35 – 13:10 – Gergely Brandl: Urban Witchcraft Trials in the Great Hungarian plain: State, Politics, Crime and Social Order in the Szeged Trials
13:10 – 13:45 – Bence K. Rácz: Panic in Pölöske: A Witchcraft Trial as Condensation of Conflicts in an Eighteenth-Century Hungarian Village

13:45 – 14:30 – Buffet lunch break

14:30 – 16:50 – Second session (chair: Ildikó Sz. Kristóf)
14:30 – 15:05 – Tünde Komáromi: Witchcraft in Torda county (comitatus) and Aranyos seat (sedes) in the 17-18th centuries
15:05 – 15:40 – Agnes Flora: Exorcism in a Glocal Context Demonic Struggle and Religious Competition
15:40 – 16:15 – Blanka Szeghyová: Before the Witch Trials: Early Magic Accusations in Hungary and the State of Research in Slovakia

16:15 – 16:45 – Coffee break

16:45 – 17:45 – Gábor Klaniczay, Tomasz Wiślicz, Blanka Szeghyová, Deniver Vukelić:
Round table discussion and Q&A: **On the future of the research for the Habsburg Witchcraft Trials**
(chair: Gergely Brandl)

17:45 – 18:00 – Conclusion of Day One

18:00 – 19:00 – Short guided tour through Zagreb's Upper Town (in English)
19:00 – 21:00 – Dinner time

DAY 2
Wednesday, 14 October 2026

9:00 – 10:30 – Plenary session (chair: Petar Bujas)
9:00 – 9:45 – Tomasz Wiślicz: Burning the Subjects: The Role of the Nobility in Initiating Witch Trials in Rural Areas of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth
9:45 – 10:30 – Deniver Vukelić: Witch-Trial Research in Croatian Historiography: A State-of-the-Field Review

10:30 – 10:40 – Coffee break

10:40 – 13:55 – Third Session (chair: Deniver Vukelić)
10:40 – 11:15 – Petar Bujas, Hrvoje Gračanin: Demonological Skepticism of Augustin Kažotić in the Context of Early Modern Criticism of the Reality of Magical Offences
11:15 – 11:50 – Zvjezdana Sikirić Assouline: The Specificities of Working with Manuscript and Published Early Modern Archival Sources on Witch Persecutions

11:50 – 12:10 – Coffee break

12:10 – 12:45 – Klaudia Kelemen: March 26th, 1756: The beginning of the end of the Croatian Witch hunt
12:45 – 13:20 – Lucija Pušonjić: (Institutional Violence Against Women: The Role of the Body in Habsburg Witch Hunts
13:20 – 13:55 – Kristina Milković: Superstition as a topic of reports on the Croatian-Slavonian Military Frontier

13:55 – 14:45 – Buffet lunch break

14:45 – 17:30 – Fourth Session (chair: Tomasz Wiślicz)
14:45 – 15:20 – Matevž Košir: The typology and socio-economic context of witch trials in Styria and Carniola
15:20 – 15:55 – Davide Busato: Between Witchcraft and the Returning Dead: A Quantitative Approach to Exhumation Practices in Central-Eastern Europe (17th–18th Centuries)
15:55 – 16:30 – Karolina Anna Wojtucka: Not just witches: Men as defendants in witchcraft trials in Velké Losiny and Šumperk in the 17th century

16:30 – 17:00 – Conclusion and Conference Ending

18:30 – 21:00 – Dinner time

CONTRA SAGAS

ABSTRACTS

KEYNOTE SESSION

KEYNOTE LECTURE 1

War on the Witches' Dark Counter-State? The Structure of Witch-Hunting in the Spanish-Habsburg Lands and Their Border Regions

Rita Voltmer
(FB III – Geschichtliche Landeskunde, Trier University, Germany)

Abstract: From 1591 onwards, Philip II, the Most Catholic King of Spain, issued numerous ordinances aimed at eradicating witchcraft as part of his programme to establish sovereign authority in the Spanish Netherlands. In the province of Luxembourg, however, extensive witch-hunts were already well under way. These occurred primarily in small, face-to-face lordships that disregarded royal orders and used witchcraft trials to assert their autonomy and authority within their patrimonies, working hand in hand with witch-hunting committees formed by members of the local population.

In 1603, Henri Boguet, a judge and demonologist in Franche-Comté, explicitly declared war on the witches' dark counter-state. He portrayed thousands of witches, both male and female, assembled under Satan's banner to overthrow divinely ordained kingship. Taking these examples as its starting point, this paper examines the structure of witch-hunting in the Spanish Habsburg lands – including Franche-Comté, Luxembourg, and Flanders – as well as in neighbouring Habsburg territories, such as Alsace, and in the western regions of the Holy Roman Empire.

The paper focuses particularly on the links between political demonology and policies concerning witchcraft, considered in conjunction with other factors that initiated witch-hunts, such as social, economic, and religious crises. It also examines the impact of different legal systems and, above all, the personal influence of local individuals and groups – including peasants, urban dwellers, and nobles – who believed that they and their families were threatened by witchcraft.

Keywords: witch-hunting, Spanish Habsburg lands, Franche-Comté, Luxembourg, Flanders, Alsace

KEYNOTE LECTURE 2

Habsburg Monarchy: Catalyzer or Moderator of Witch Trials in Hungary?

Gábor Klaniczay
(Department of Medieval History, Faculty of Arts, Eötvös Loránd University / Department of Historical Studies, Central European University, Hungary)

Abstract: Witchcraft prosecutions spread like an epidemic across late medieval and early modern Europe. Although the basic pattern of witchcraft accusations appears to have been widespread, regional comparisons have revealed significant differences in the timing, nature, and scale of outbreaks, particularly when the persecution of witchcraft became massive and endemic. Careful examination of these differences helps us understand the complex interplay of the underlying economic, social, cultural, and religious motivations, as well as the political, judicial, and ethnic factors that contributed to these persecutions.

Witchcraft prosecutions in Hungary began in the sixteenth century, during the decades in which the north-western third of the divided Kingdom of Hungary became part of the Habsburg Monarchy. Did the witch-hunts already taking place in Austria and Styria influence developments further east? How do the late sixteenth-century witch trials in Catholic western Hungary compare with those in the Protestant east, particularly in Debrecen and Transylvania?

A century later, when the central regions of the country were liberated from Ottoman rule and incorporated into the Habsburg Monarchy, witch trials underwent a significant resurgence. Previous research has documented the effects of the introduction of the Austrian criminal-law manual, the Praxis Criminalis, as well as the considerable number of Austrian and German soldiers who acted as accusers in witchcraft cases. But were these the only factors behind Hungary's eighteenth-century peak in witchcraft prosecutions – one of the latest in Europe? A comparison with the similarly late peak in Poland, where Habsburg influence was absent, may contribute to a better understanding of this phenomenon.

Finally, the legal framework of the Habsburg Monarchy and the increasingly enlightened orientation of the Viennese court – under Charles VI and, to a much greater extent, under Maria Theresa – also served to contain, restrain, and ultimately end witchcraft prosecutions, which continued to enjoy strong local and popular support in Hungary. The interventions of the Viennese court to halt the Szeged witch panic of 1728, the largest in Hungarian history; the medical investigations into the vampire scandals in the southern borderland of the Banat during the 1730s and 1740s; the activities of Gerard van Swieten, Maria Theresa's court physician; and, finally, the Lex caesareo-regia of 1766, which prohibited judicial investigations of the crimen magiae, were milestones in this institutional process of moderation within the Habsburg Monarchy.

Keywords: witch trials, Hungary, Praxis Criminalis, Habsburg influence, Maria Theresa

SESSION 1

The Guild of Midwives: Historians' Myth or Social History?

Ildikó Sz. Kristóf
(Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Ethnology, Research Centre for the Humanities, Eötvös Loránd University / Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, Hungary)

Abstract: The topic I propose falls within the category of methodological and theoretical innovations in witchcraft studies. In 1985–1986, when witchcraft studies were gaining prominence in many European countries, I was a student at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest. I enthusiastically attended the courses on witch-hunting introduced by Gábor Klaniczay at that time. In 1987, I joined the Hungarian witch-trial research group led by Éva Pócs at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. In 1991, I submitted my doctoral dissertation on the social and religious contexts of Protestant witch-hunts in eastern Hungary – specifically, in the town of Debrecen and Bihar County – from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. In this paper, I look back at our work and examine it from a critical methodological perspective, asking how, by what specific methods, and on the basis of which assumptions we conducted our research at the time.

Centred on the debate initiated by David Harley, Richard Horsley, and other "Western" historians during the 1980s concerning the problematic identification of witches with midwives and healers, my argument raises questions about the limits of historians' interpretative authority and the nature of the historical sources they use. In my view, this earlier debate remains relevant to current research.

The period in question saw the emergence of historical anthropology in Hungary, as interdisciplinary and thematic innovations contributed to the revival of both historical and ethnographic research. Important questions concerning source analysis and criticism were raised: Who were the accused witches and their accusers? What kinds of historical sources could be used to learn about them? Viewed from a more recent and critical perspective, these questions can also shed light on the broader sociocultural dimensions of the construction of the witch and on the local ideologies surrounding it, including those concerning ethnicity, religion, and gender.

I argue that our early methods of investigation were by no means employed in vain. For example, the three principal groups among those accused of witchcraft in Calvinist Debrecen and the villages of Bihar County following the end of Ottoman rule in 1691 – (1) powerful women in general, (2) healers and midwives in particular, and (3) impoverished inhabitants and beggars – provide important insights into certain local social and historical processes. Even today, and even when viewed through a critical, "postmodern" lens, these processes should be regarded as relevant to the development of witch-hunting. They could and should be compared with developments in other regions of the Habsburg Monarchy, although such comparative work has yet to be undertaken. Religious ideology, the formation of occupational guilds in towns, and the centralisation of poor relief – all manifestations of early modern local authority – should be studied in relation to local and regional witch-hunting.

Looking back at earlier research from new perspectives does not necessarily mean that we must discard its findings. If some of them are to be rejected, however, the criteria for doing so must be clearly defined. In my presentation, I discuss these methodological questions and propose possible answers to some of them.

Keywords: witchcraft studies; methodological criticism; historical anthropology; Hungarian witch trials; Protestant witch-hunts; Debrecen; Bihar County; Habsburg Monarchy; witches and midwives; source criticism; interpretative authority; construction of the witch; gender; poor relief

Urban Witchcraft Trials on the Great Hungarian Plain: State, Politics, Crime, and Social Order in the Szeged Trials

Gergely Brandl
(University of Szeged, Albert Szent-Györgyi Medical School, Department of Medical Communication and Translation Studies, Latin Terminology and History of Medicine Group; HUN-REN–University of Szeged–Eötvös Loránd University Research Group for Classical Studies, Hungary)

Abstract: Witchcraft in early modern Europe is often associated with the everyday life of small rural communities. At the same time, major urban centres also experienced persecutions and even witchcraft panics, as occurred, for example, in the German territories, although trials in large cities were generally less frequent and more restrained. While no distinct form of urban witchcraft can be clearly defined, differences resulting from urban institutions – including medical institutions, legal and judicial systems, and mechanisms of social governance – have been identified and became increasingly apparent by the eighteenth century.

These tendencies can also be observed in the Kingdom of Hungary. Following the Great Turkish War and the reconquest of the formerly Ottoman-occupied territories, however, urban environments presented a highly diverse picture, with regional differences between towns becoming particularly significant. Various indications of institutional underdevelopment and delayed development were widespread, including political corruption among urban elites, the absence of a clear separation between administrative and judicial authority, indebtedness, and limited professionalisation. Nevertheless, despite considerable social and economic disparities, the free royal cities may be regarded as politically consolidated entities with relatively stable judicial frameworks. They therefore provide a useful basis for comparing judicial practices and social contexts, including those associated with witchcraft prosecutions.

Because of the nature of the surviving sources, legal and judicial contexts have traditionally occupied a central place in international scholarship on witch-hunting. It was only later, following the anthropological turn, that scholars began to situate trials more systematically within their specific judicial contexts and to interpret them as criminal proceedings. This made it possible to compare witchcraft trials with other categories of criminal cases in terms of their frequency, sanctions, evidentiary procedures, and related factors, and thus to examine witchcraft as a criminal offence within the contemporary legal framework. At the same time, such studies have highlighted several methodological challenges, including differences between legal systems, the "composite" nature of the concept of witchcraft, and the uneven availability of sources. Consequently, research adopting legal-historical or criminal-historical approaches has generally focused on the consistency of judicial practice within individual courts – most commonly those in urban centres – and has frequently employed microhistorical perspectives.

Bringing these perspectives together, the first half of my presentation examines regional variations in the waves of persecution across the Kingdom of Hungary and highlights the distinctive characteristics of the free royal cities. I argue that this legal status emerged through specific political processes and did not correspond in practice to a uniform urban structure. I then analyse data on witchcraft prosecutions in the formerly Ottoman-occupied territories, focusing on differences resulting from the institutional underdevelopment and administrative delays characteristic of the reconstruction of state and municipal authority. I demonstrate that the Szeged witch-hunt of 1726–1744 followed the judicial practices of market towns formerly under Ottoman rule more closely than it followed the patterns found in other free royal cities. I also provide examples illustrating the broader problems associated with this institutional "backwardness" or "belatedness".

In the second half of the presentation, I focus on a particular institutional deficiency and use witchcraft prosecutions to demonstrate the shortcomings of the city's judicial system and legal-political institutions. As a case study, I examine the period of the great witch-hunt of 1728–1729, outlining the pattern of legal abuses and collusion among members of the political elite that enabled the largest witch-hunt in the history of the Kingdom of Hungary to take place. In conclusion, I argue that the underdeveloped urban institutional framework and the low level of professionalisation facilitated these abuses – or, at the very least, failed to prevent them. I further suggest that similar abuses may also have occurred in other criminal proceedings and even in more institutionally developed cities because of the generally inadequate regulation of urban administration and judicial practice throughout the kingdom.

Keywords: urban witchcraft; history of crime; Szeged trials; urban legal and administrative institutions; Hungarian Royal Chanceller

Panic in Pölöske: A Witchcraft Trial as Condensation of Conflicts in an Eighteenth-Century Hungarian Village

Bence K. Rácz
(PhD Student, Institute of History, Faculty of Arts, Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary)

Abstract: The case of Ilona Gál (1740), the largest known eighteenth-century witchcraft trial in western Zala County, comprises 38 witness testimonies and offers a rare window into the normative frameworks, notions of property, and conflict-resolution strategies of early modern rural communities.

At the analytical centre of the paper lies a seemingly peripheral yet structurally decisive phenomenon: the practice of theft. The vast majority of maleficium narratives are rooted in acts of petty theft involving fruit, eggs, milk, or firewood, which subsequently trigger the witch's alleged "revenge". This narrative logic echoes the findings of international scholarship, suggesting that the witchcraft panic was not merely a projection of superstitious fears but also a crystallisation of tensions surrounding peasant property, feudal obligations, and economic inequality within the community.

Combining the approaches of microhistory and cultural anthropology and drawing on urbarial registers, national censuses, and military surveys as contextual sources, the paper argues that the courtroom became a space in which transgressions formally disregarded by the court could nevertheless be articulated: theft had effectively become a secondary, tolerated offence. The paper thus argues that legal practice provides a more faithful reflection of a community's operative norms than the formal provisions of statutory law. The trial consequently functions as a social document in which the structural contradictions of a village community become legible.

Keywords: theft; Zala County; Pölöske; witch trials; village community; tolerated crime

SESSION 2

Witchcraft in Torda County (comitatus) and Aranyos Seat (sedes) in the 17-18th centuries and nowadays

Tünde Komáromi
(Institute of Social and Communication Sciences, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary, Hungary)

Abstract: This paper combines an analysis of witch trials with contemporary fieldwork on witchcraft beliefs and practices in a region of central Transylvania comprising the historical Torda County (*comitatus Tordensis*) and Aranyos Seat (*Sedes Siculicalis Aranyos*). It draws on published historical sources, including the collection of witch-trial records edited by András Kiss and Sándor Pál-Antal, A Magyarországi Boszorkányság Forrásai (The Sources of Witchcraft in Hungary, vol. III, 2002, pp. 277–458). Surviving witch-trial records from Torda County date from 1695 to 1804, while those from Aranyos Seat cover the period from 1651 to 1792. For comparison, I use unpublished fieldwork material collected in the region between 1993 and 2001, as well as my monograph Rontás és társadalom Aranyosszéken (Witchcraft and Society in Aranyosszék), published in 2009 by Babeș-Bolyai University Press and the Kriza János Ethnographical Society in Cluj-Napoca/Kolozsvár.

In examining the region's early modern witch trials, I focus on questions of morality and the interconnected accusations of witchcraft, fornication, and theft, as well as on the problematic status of the supposedly supernatural knowledge attributed to witches, healers, and seers. The cases discussed include that of Aniska, an itinerant beggar who was simultaneously accused of witchcraft, theft, and fornication, and that of a twenty-two-year-old Romanian Orthodox healer who was accused of deception and charlatanism after severely burning a five-week-old infant.

Next, I will trace possible connections between historical and contemporary social phenomena. I will consider the impact of the Enlightenment on the concepts of body and soul, and compare traditional and modern love magic. Even nowadays, multiple accusations against one person can be found, although they are spread by gossip and never taken to court. The social role of healers and seers in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, as well as that of some contemporary Romanian Orthodox priests, is ambivalent. They share certain qualities, such as their ethnicity, religious affiliation, supposed supernatural powers, the large number of visitors they receive, and the wide variety of problems they treat, including demonic possession.

Furthermore, there is one more reason to connect religiosity and witchcraft in this study: in one of the trials, somebody is accused of being dried out by fasting for nine Fridays. Religious practices used outside their original context risk ambiguous interpretation, even today. Overall, it seems that many beliefs and practices have survived the last few centuries, while attitudes towards witchcraft and folk healing have changed significantly.

Keywords: Transylvania; Torda County; Aranyosszék; witch trials; early modern witchcraft; witchcraft and society; moral accusations; fornication; theft; folk healing; religiosity and witchcraft; demonic possession; vernacular beliefs.

Exorcism in a Glocal Context: Demonic Struggle and Religious Competition in Sixteenth-Century Cluj/Kolozsvár

Ágnes Flóra
(Romanian National Archives, Cluj; Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj, Romania)

Abstract: In 1583 and early 1584, the Jesuits in Cluj – under pressure to demonstrate success, constrained by expectations of efficiency, and eager to legitimize their mission before the Holy See – reported numerous miraculous reconversions to Catholicism, as well as successful exorcisms. Beyond their primary aim of constructing a favorable self-image for the Holy See, these accounts – though highly apocryphal – also conform to broader patterns of colonial enterprise or missionary imperialism.

At the same time, the reports reveal elements of conversive lived religion, in which individual actors – such as women engaged in prayer and candle-lighting, a reconverted Catholic villager assisting the possessed, or a Jesuit priest placing a lamb on a woman's chest – played a crucial role as agents in reinforcing and actively shaping Catholic belief and practice, while also participating in the struggle against the devil. These forms of individual and collective agency directed against demonic forces likewise contributed to the dynamics that fostered many witchcraft trials. too.

Exorcistic practices were also present during the limited outbreak of witchcraft prosecutions in 1584. One of the so-called cunning women, who was later burned at the stake, reportedly believed that a client was possessed by evil spirits and performed rituals intended to expel them. The client appears to have participated willingly in these cleansing and protective rites, as did others who described similar practices intended to establish a protective boundary between benevolent and malevolent forces.

In this presentation, I aim to examine exorcistic practices in Catholic and Protestant urban contexts, while highlighting parallels between local and colonial Jesuit missionary activity, in order to frame these developments as a glocal phenomenon.

Keywords: exorcism, occultism, Jesuits, urbanites, religious competition, devil-semiotics

Before the Witch Trials: Early Magic Accusations in Hungary and the State of Research in Slovakia

Blanka Szeghyová
(Institute of History, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava, Slovakia)

Abstract: This paper examines early cases of magic-related accusations in Hungary, mostly in the territories of present-day Slovakia, focusing on a phase that predates the fully developed pattern of early modern witch trials. Unlike the later "classical" witchcraft persecutions, characterized by formalized procedures, coerced confessions, and a range of punishments including capital sentences, some of these earlier cases remained at the level of accusation, suspicion, or local conflict resolution. They did not necessarily culminate in execution or even formal condemnation; in some instances, accusations could even backfire against the accusers, exposing tensions within communities and forms of judicial response. By analysing selected cases, the paper highlights the role of reputation and social negotiation, as well as the coexistence of magical beliefs with more pragmatic judicial practices. These episodes reveal a transitional phase in which magic was contested but not yet systematically prosecuted as a capital crime.
The second part of the paper offers an overview of Slovak historiography on witchcraft and magic, assessing its current state. Particular attention is given to cases that have not yet been included in the source editions published in Hungary.

Keywords: early modern witchcraft, magic accusations, judicial practices, social negotiation, witchcraft historiography, unpublished archival sources, Kingdom of Hungary, Slovakia

PLENARY SESSION

Burning the Subjects: The Role of the Nobility in Initiating Witch Trials in Rural Areas of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth

Tomasz Wiślicz
(The Tadeusz Manteuffel Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Poland)

Abstract: In the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, witchcraft trials were conducted almost exclusively before municipal courts, as these institutions held jurisdiction over capital crimes, had access to executioners, and were authorized to interrogate suspects under judicial torture. However, a quantitative analysis of known cases demonstrates that the highest number of witchcraft trials did not take place in the largest cities. Instead, such cases were more frequently heard in smaller urban centers and towns. Moreover, the accused were not predominantly townspeople; more often they were dependent peasants from surrounding rural areas.

In such instances, it was the landowner or estate administrator – typically a member of the nobility – who had to initiate the proceedings, deliver the accused to the municipal court or summon the court to the village, and finance both the judicial process and any eventual execution.

The paper examines the role of the local nobility in the legal persecution of alleged witches, asking to what extent a feudal lord merely fulfilled his function as a judicial authority over his subjects in resolving local disputes within the village community, and to what extent he acted as an active initiator of witchcraft accusations, driven by his own beliefs and worldview. It also considers how far such trials could be employed by the nobility as a deliberate instrument of seigneurial control over rural communities and as a means of managing local social conflicts.

Keywords: seigneurial power; social control; municipal courts; peasant women accused of witchcraft; rural conflict

Witch-Trial Research in Croatian Historiography: A State-of-the-Field Review

Deniver Vukelić
(Faculty of Croatian Studies, University of Zagreb, Croatia)

Abstract: Since the earliest works published in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, numerous Croatian scholarly articles, books, and undergraduate, master's, and doctoral theses have addressed the history of secular trials for magical offences, witchcraft prosecutions, and related phenomena. These studies vary considerably in scope and completeness, depending on the sources and previous scholarship available to their authors. Approaches to the transcription, editing, and publication of primary sources have also changed over time, as have methods of analysing individual cases. Furthermore, many published sources and scholarly works are now difficult to access, particularly those issued more than a century – or even a century and a half – ago, while some primary sources and archival materials have unfortunately been lost.

This presentation, together with the more detailed paper to follow, provides a comprehensive overview of published scholarship on the subject, including both scholarly and professional publications, as well as editions of primary sources. The earliest texts and articles appeared in the mid-nineteenth century, while the first serial publications of historical sources began towards the end of that century. From the mid-twentieth century onwards, systematic research into previously unexplored archival material largely ceased, only to resume during the past decade.

The presentation examines the development of witch-trial research in Croatian historiography, the methodological and practical problems encountered by earlier researchers, and the difficulties involved in using older scholarship and source editions. It concludes by proposing several guidelines for future research, including the systematic examination of neglected archival collections, the critical re-evaluation of previously published sources, and the application of contemporary methodological approaches to both known and newly discovered cases.

Keywords: witch trials, Croatian historiography, primary sources, archives, history of research; research methodology

SESSION 3

Demonological Scepticism of Augustin Kažotić in the Context of Early Modern Criticism of the Reality of Magical Offences

Petar Bujas
(Cultural and Information Centre, Zagreb, Croatia)
Hrvoje Gračanin
(Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, Croatia)

Abstract: Augustin Kažotić (c. 1260–1323), a Dominican friar and bishop of Zagreb, was among the theologians consulted by Pope John XXII when formulating the decision to extend inquisitorial jurisdiction to magical offences – an act that explicitly empowered inquisitors to prosecute sorcerers, diviners, and those who, through the abuse of the sacraments, entered into pacts with demons.

In his treatise Dicta fratris Augustini episcopi Zagabriensis, super questinibus de baptizacione ymaginum et aliarum superstitionum, Kažotić articulated an epistemological framework that, much like the earlier Canon Episcopi, rests on the assumption that the primary causes of magical crimes do not lie in a demonic pact, even though precisely this view later became the dogmatic foundation of demonological discourse, especially in the Malleus Maleficarum (1486), and consequently in the witch persecutions of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries Habsburg Monarchy.

Kažotić developed four theological categories – heresy, divination (sortilegium), invocation of demons, and sacrilege – which shaped the demonological construction of the crime of witchcraft, yet he interpreted them through an epistemological lens of ignorance and error. Kažotić's thesis positions him as a precursor to the skeptical tradition that would only much later be developed by critics of the justifiability of mass witch persecutions.

Kažotić's case thus illuminates not only the genealogy of persecution but also an intellectual tradition of moderate scepticism which, through various channels, anticipated and in part prepared the epistemological shift brought about in the Era of Enlightenment, culminating in the abolition of judicial repression of diabolical witchcraft in the Habsburg lands in the second half of the eighteenth century. Accordingly, the paper will compare Kažotić's central thesis and its elaboration with selected examples from the tradition of early modern demonological skepticism, in order to discern their convergences and divergences.

Keywords: demonology; scepticism; Augustin Kažotić; magical offences; early modern Europe

The Specificities of Working with Manuscript and Published Early Modern Archival Sources on Witch Persecutions

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Abstract: This presentation addresses fundamental questions concerning the ecdotics of Latin sources relating to early modern witchcraft prosecutions in the Croatian lands. It focuses primarily on the challenges involved in working with manuscript sources: palaeography and transcription, particularly the problems posed by abbreviations characteristic of legal documents; the identification of quotations from contemporary legal literature embedded in the records; and linguistic interference between Latin and Croatian. The latter occurs both in independent Croatian-language quotations from witness testimonies and in individual Croatian expressions incorporated into the Latin text. Their transcription and presentation raise the question of how pre-Gaj dialectal orthographies should be represented in a modern critical edition.

With regard to previously published material, the presentation emphasises the need to return to the original archival documents. As recent research has demonstrated, existing editions are often unreliable, while the current archival shelfmarks of the documents must also be identified. The critical examination and revision of previously published sources therefore constitute an indispensable part of research, alongside the discovery and publication of new material.

The presentation also considers the preparation of new critical editions and the appropriate extent of editorial intervention, transcription, and scholarly analysis. In what form should revised or newly discovered sources be published: as transcriptions alone, as transcriptions accompanied by translations, or as transcriptions, translations, and interpretative studies? What is the role of the historian in editing and publishing historical sources, particularly in establishing transparent and methodologically sound criteria for their selection?

Witchcraft prosecutions have occupied a distinctive place in Croatian historiography since its emergence in the nineteenth century onward. Indeed, it may be said that, within Croatian ecdotics, this was one of the first topics to move beyond the publication of strictly diplomatic and political material. For this reason, a particularly serious approach is required to the material published so far, from the pioneering editions of the nineteenth century to more recent publications, to which, in accordance with modern ecdotic standards, new material should of course be added.

Keywords: witchcraft prosecutions; early modern period; ecdotics; archival sources; manuscript sources; Latin sources; Croatian historiography; transcription; legal abbreviations; critical editions; archival shelfmarks; source criticism

March 26th, 1756: The beginning of the end of the Croatian Witch hunt

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Abstract: This paper begins by examining the decision adopted by the Croatian-Slavonian Diet on 26 March 1756. The provision required verdicts in trials for witchcraft and sorcery to be submitted to Maria Theresa, Queen of Croatia and Hungary, for confirmation. Croatian courts could therefore continue to conduct witchcraft trials, but they could no longer carry out sentences without the ruler's approval. This new requirement made prosecutions increasingly difficult, time-consuming, and expensive, thereby marking, as the title suggests, the beginning of the end of the Croatian witch-hunt.

The paper also examines the broader circumstances and selected cases that preceded this decision. These include the document recording the "examination" of Margareta Kuljanka in Zagreb in 1733 and the German treatise Abhandlung des Daseyns der Gespenster, which is believed to have contributed to contemporary legal and intellectual debates concerning "superstition" and, subsequently, witchcraft.

The paper considers the role of Maria Theresa and her government in this process. To what extent did the decision of 1756 result from the ruler's personal intervention, and to what extent did it reflect broader changes in Habsburg legal and administrative policy? How did the trials and controversies preceding the decision contribute to its adoption? Finally, how did the new procedure lead to the gradual decline and eventual cessation of witchcraft prosecutions in Croatia?

Keywords: witch-hunt; witch trials; Maria Theresa; Croatian-Slavonian Diet; legal history; witchcraft legislation

Institutional Violence Against Women: The Role of the Body in Habsburg Witch Hunts

Lucija Pušonjić
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Abstract: In the early modern period, the female body served as the primary site for the manifestation of systematic institutional violence by state and church apparatuses. Rather than functioning solely as a passive object of punishment, the body was used within Habsburg judicial practice as an instrument through which gendered and social discipline could be imposed. The procedural instrumentalization of the body, ranging from visual stigmatization with "devil's marks" to brutal torture, transformed the female body into a key evidentiary tool of the investigative process.

The construction of the witch as a deviant subject was inseparable from physical violence, defining these persecutions as a pinnacle of misogyny. Through the analysis of relevant historical sources, it is possible to trace how weighing, shaving, invasive examinations, and the infliction of pain served the systematic destruction of the physical integrity of the defendants. Such procedures were not merely acts of wanton cruelty but ritualized displays of the authority's dominance over the woman, whose body had to be exposed, stripped, and destroyed in the public sphere. Ultimately, the role of the body in these trials shows that the physical manifestation of "evil" was necessary to legitimize the persecution. The destruction of the witch's body served as a lasting warning and a means of consolidating social hierarchy.

Keywords: body; institutional violence; Habsburg Monarchy; women accused of witchcraft; torture; instrumentalisation; gender

Superstition as a topic of reports on the Croatian-Slavonian Military Frontier

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Abstract: The Habsburg Monarchy administered the Croatian Military Frontier for more than three centuries. Its original purpose was to defend the Habsburg lands against the Ottoman Empire. However, after the immediate threat of Ottoman conquest diminished towards the end of the seventeenth century, the imperial court did not abolish the institution. Instead, it assigned the Military Frontier a new role: to provide a permanently available, trained, and inexpensive military force for deployment in Habsburg wars. The system rested on the institution of the soldier-peasant. Alongside its military and economic objectives, the court also pursued policies intended to reshape the territory and its population. These policies addressed a broad range of social and cultural concerns, including religion, morality, and popular belief. Particularly during the eighteenth century, and in accordance with Enlightenment ideals, court officials sought to discipline and "civilise" the population by eradicating behaviours, practices, and beliefs that they regarded as superstitious. This presentation examines these initiatives of the Habsburg authorities within the social and cultural context of the eighteenth century.

Keywords: Croatian-Slavonian Military Frontier; Habsburg Monarchy; eighteenth century; Habsburg officers; military reports; everyday life; frontier population; superstition; popular beliefs; military administration; social history.

SESSION 4

The typology and Socio-Economic Context of Witch Trials in (Slovene) Styria and Carniola

Matevž Košir
(Archives of the Republic of Slovenia, Alma Mater Europaea University, Slovenia)

Abstract: The witch trials in Carniola and Styria were not conducted continuously over time. The largest witch persecutions in Carniola coincided with a period of economic hardship in the province during the last decade of the 17th century, when the prices of grain were at their highest levels in a century.

An analysis of several trials reveals a connection between anti-witch sentiment and adverse weather conditions. In many cases, severe storms triggered the beginning of a trial, during which individuals who had already been suspected in earlier proceedings were brought to trial first. The victims of the larger witch trials were subsequently denounced by previously tried defendants, who claimed to have encountered them at witches' gatherings.

An analysis of the trial victims also shows that many were related to one another. Elderly women predominated among the victims. Altogether, 68.8 % (341) of the accused were women, 12.5 % (62) were men, while for the remaining 18.9 % (94) the gender was not specified. Among the 56 victims named individually in the Poljane trials (1692–1699), there were 50 women and 6 men. Most were married peasant serfs, although some were marketspeople or members of families who earned their living through other professions (e.g. blacksmith). Comparisons with parish register data indicate that the victims were otherwise entirely ordinary people of their time.

The trials followed standardised judicial procedures, while the interrogations were modelled on the 1656 criminal code of Emperor Ferdinand III. The questions reflected the learned demonological conception of witchcraft and included allegations of pacts with the Devil and participation in witches' gatherings.

Keywords: Carniola, Slovene Styria; witch trials; sixteenth to eighteenth centuries; economic hardship; adverse weathervictims

Between Witchcraft and the Returning Dead: A Quantitative Approach to Exhumation Practices in Central-Eastern Europe (17th–18th Centuries)

Davide Busato
(Independent Researcher, Italy)

Abstract: This paper presents a quantitative and comparative investigation of the relationship between witchcraft and the returning dead in Central-Eastern Europe between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is based on a database of cases involving revenants, grave disturbance, and postmortem interventions, which has also served as the foundation for the construction of a GIS designed to support the spatial analysis of the phenomenon.

Within this broader corpus, particular attention is devoted to cases in which the manipulation of graves or corpses is accompanied by explicit accusations of witchcraft. While the opening of tombs, the exhumation of bodies, and their destruction constituted widespread responses to perceived postmortem threats, the attribution of witchcraft appears to have been more selective and contingent upon specific local circumstances. By isolating this subset of cases, the paper examines the conditions under which categories such as witch, sorcerer, and returning dead came to overlap.

Rather than arguing for a direct continuity between witchcraft and revenance, the paper suggests that accusations of witchcraft emerged in particular contexts, especially when communities or authorities sought to explain, justify, or regulate disturbing events associated with the dead. In such instances, interventions upon the corpse became a point of convergence between vernacular practice and formal systems of classification.

As the research remains in progress, this paper offers preliminary findings as well as methodological reflections on the value of combining database construction, GIS mapping, and quantitative analysis in the study of post-mortem deviance.

Keywords: witchcraft; revenants; exhumation; Central-Eastern Europe; GIS; database; quantitative analysis; post-mortem practices; social control; classification

Not just witches: Men as Defendants in the Witchcraft Trials in Velké Losiny and Šumperk in the 17th century

Karolina Anna Wojtucka
(Institute of History, University of Wroclaw, Poland)

Abstract: In 1678, during Mass, Marina Schuchin attempted to remove a consecrated host from the church. This incident triggered a wave of witchcraft accusations and marked the beginning of witch trials in the Velké Losiny estate. Very quickly, they spread to the neighboring town of Šumperk and led to the deaths of nearly one hundred people. In the historiography of witch trials, research has predominantly focused on women; however, this picture remains incomplete without taking into account men, who were also brought before the courts, accused of participating in sabbaths, and ascribed specific roles within the diabolical community.

These men were not anonymous figures – they fulfilled social roles as husbands, fathers, craftsmen or officials, forming part of the local community structure. The aim of this presentation is to provide an overview of the men accused of witchcraft in the aforementioned centres and to analyse the charges brought against them, the course of the investigations, their experience of imprisonment, and the mechanisms leading to the imposition of death sentences. Particular attention will be paid to conceptions of the sabbath and the roles attributed to the accused within its structure.

It is worth emphasizing that among the accused were individuals of wealth and importance to the local community, such as the mayor, a soapmaker, and a gingerbread maker. The most well-known victim of these trials was the clergyman Christoph Alois Lautner, who was sentenced to death by burning at the stake.

Keywords: Velké Losiny; Šumperk; witch trials; male witches; gender and witchcraft; diabolical community; Christoph Alois Lautner; early modern Moravia; social roles



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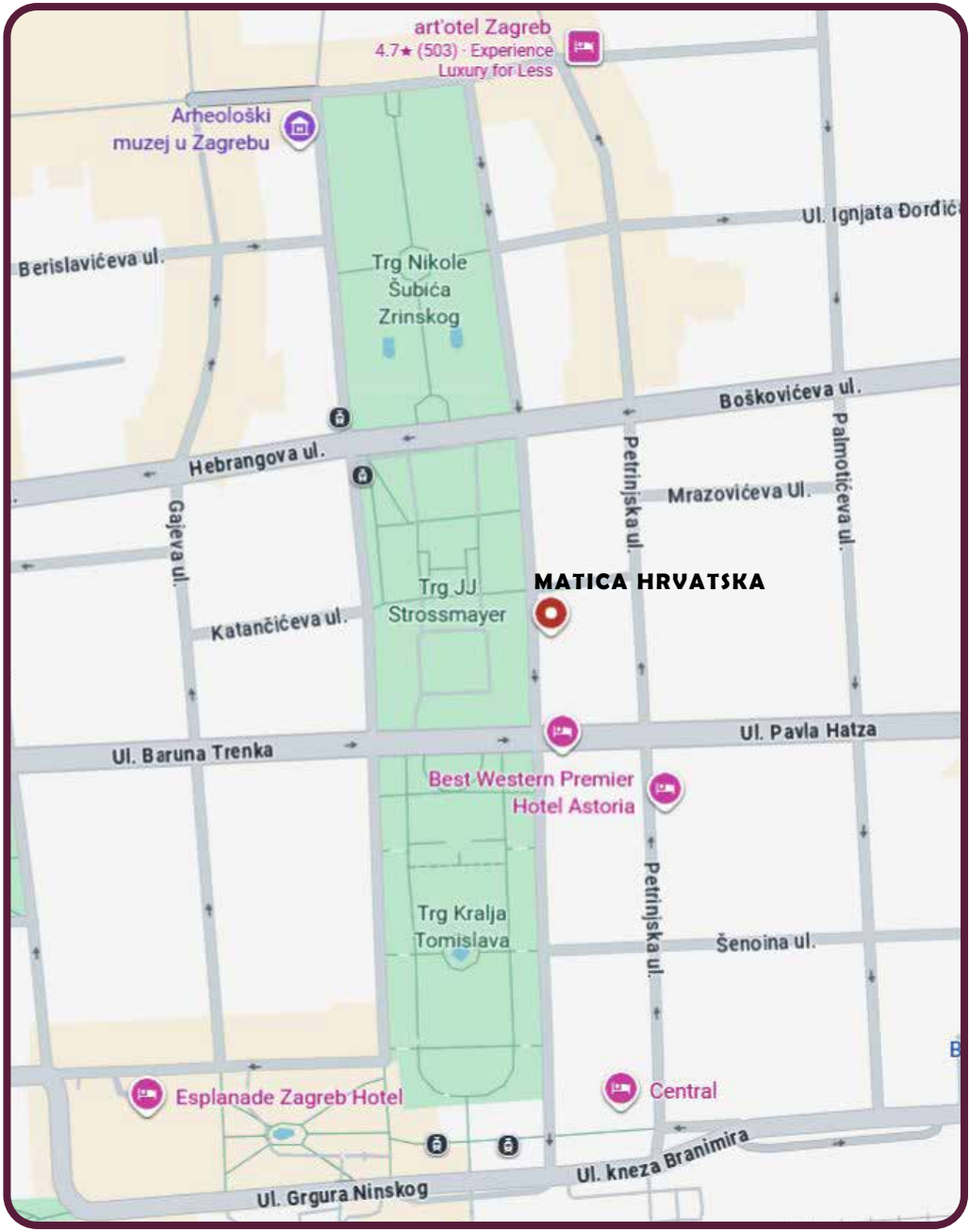
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