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## WITCHCRAFT TRIALS

On the margin of the book by Jacek W i j a c z k a, *Procesy o czary w Prusach Książęcych/ Brandenburgskich w XVI–XVIII wieku (Witchcraft Trials in the Ducal/Brandenburg Prussia between the 16th and 18th Centuries)*, Toruń 2007, the Mikołaj Kopernik University Press, pp. 363, Appendix, Bibliography, Geographical Index, Tables, Illustrations.

Witchcraft trials have been fascinating historians for over 150 years. Since the book by J. Michelet was published<sup>1</sup>, a large number of other works on this subject have been written, which examine it from different perspectives. More than 80 years ago, an English scholar Margaret Murray presented an anthropological approach, based on the premise that witches and their Sabbaths had always existed in reality, as the continuation of pagan practices and beliefs among societies between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, which had been christianized only superficially<sup>2</sup>. Being strongly criticized all years long, Murray has recently got partially rehabilitated. A new stage in the debate was originated forty years ago thanks to the two important works by Hugo Trevor–Roper<sup>3</sup> which presented the problem in a broad geographical context, from Scotland to Transylvania. Simultaneously, however, Trevor–Roper placed the phenomenon of witch-hunts exclusively within the elitist “learned” culture, linking the psychosis of witchcraft with Aristotelianism, Platonism, the development of the Reformation, and the “revolution in science”

<sup>1</sup> J. Michelet, *La sorcière*, Paris 1862.

<sup>2</sup> M. Murray, *The Witch–Cult in Western Europe*, Oxford 1921.

<sup>3</sup> H. Trevor–Roper, *Religion, the Reformation and Social Change*, London 1967; by the same author, *The European Witch–Craze of the 16th and 17th Centuries*, Harmondsworth 1969.

between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The author's both books have been impoverished by the fact that he distanced himself from popular culture, the feelings and beliefs of ordinary people, among whom these tragic events took place most frequently.

New trends in historiography appeared in the 1960s and 1970s, and were presented by a large number of scholars from different countries<sup>4</sup>. Those works were linked together by the fact that it was the world of beliefs, fears and lives of ordinary people, inhabitants of villages and small towns, which became the focal point of scientific interest. The application of quantitative methods facilitated better documentation of the respective theses, as well as made it possible to draw up a map of processes from the spatial and chronological perspective. Also, two models of persecution were successfully built: the British and the continental. K. Thomas and A. Macfarlane reached the conclusion that accusations of witchcraft had constituted part of everyday life of the English country folk in the early modern times, the phenomenon more of an endemic rather than pandemic nature. They kept emerging as results of internal conflicts, which were breaking out within village and small town communities, following, to a large extent, social and economic transformations, which led, among others, to the new perception of poor relief and charity programmes. An English stereotypical witch was a poor old woman; the accusations mostly concerned *maleficium*, not the contacts with the devil, and the Sabbath appeared among court proceedings less frequently than on the Continent. The "continental" model was based on the preponderance of the "high" and "learned" culture over the popular one. The accusations repeatedly included the themes of heretical pacts with the devil, and numerous and detailed descriptions of Sabbaths. In conse-

<sup>4</sup> C. Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults In the 16th and 17th Centuries*, London 1983 (1st Italian edition: 1966); A. Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*, London 1970; K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, London 1971; B. Ankarloo, *Trolldomsprocesserna I Sverige*, Lund 1971; H. C. Midelfort, *Witch-Hunting in South-Western Germany 1562-1684*, Stanford 1972; W. E. Monter, *Witchcraft in France and Switzerland*, Ithaca-London 1976; R. Muchembled, *Sorcières du Cambresis: L'Acculturation du monde rural aux XVIe et XVIIe ss.*, in: M.-S. Dupont-Bouchat, W. Frijhof, R. Muchembled, *Prophètes et sorcières dans le Pays-Bas*, Paris 1978; by the same author, *La sorcière au village (XVIe-au XVIIe ss.)*, Paris 1979.

quence, stricter verdicts were issued and more death penalties were executed on the Continent than on the British Isles.

The “Continental” model further developed thanks to the research devoted to specific countries. H. C. Midelfort discovered in his analysis of the great witch-hunt in southern and western Germany that their sudden decrease in the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century did not stem from the “scientific revolution” but from the fact that the accusations embraced an increasing number of social communities and began to pose a threat to more and more groups<sup>5</sup>. Christine Larnier, who in her work on Scotland presented a growing number of witchcraft trials in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, puts them in a psychological and social context, where the legitimization needs of the authorities of the day played a significant role<sup>6</sup>. A French scholar, R. Mandrou, also emphasised the role of social and political factors, showing the role bureaucracy and political connections played in arranging the trials<sup>7</sup>. Another French researcher, R. Muchembled, links witch-hunts with the processes of acculturation in the French countryside between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries., which were connected, among others, with disciplining and controlling the society by the then emerging absolutism<sup>8</sup>. One should also mention works which associate the problem of witch-hunts with the development of misogyny, being a result of the conflicts and shifts within the framework of gender relations<sup>9</sup>, e.g. the competition between men and women in the field of some professions, such as medicine<sup>10</sup>. Some new approaches were originated by the application in studies on witchcraft trials of the model created by I. Wallerstein for the analysis of the European economy, which was divided by this scholar into the centre and periphery. With it, he inspired other researchers, who attended the mid-1980s conference in Stockholm to represent different

<sup>5</sup> H. C. Midelfort, *Witch-Hunting*, op.cit.

<sup>6</sup> Ch. Larnier, *Enemies of God. The Witch-Hunt in Scotland*, Oxford 1983.

<sup>7</sup> R. Mandrou, *Magistrats et sorcières en France au XVIIe s.*, Paris 1968.

<sup>8</sup> R. Muchembled, *La sorcière au village*, op.cit.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. D. Unverhau, “Ich bin eine Hexe”. *Frauenbewegung und historische Hexenverfolgung*, in: A. Blauert, hrsg., *Ketzer, Zauberer, Hexen. Die Anfänge der europäischen Hexenverfolgung*, Frankfurt/M 1990.

<sup>10</sup> B. Ehrenreich, D. English, *Hexen, Hebammen und Krankenschwester*, München 1975.

countries from Italy and Spain to Scandinavia. In the aftermath of that conference an extremely interesting book was published, which included observations regarding the geographical map and chronological scope of the trials, their character, participants (sex, age, social and economic status of both the defendants as well as plaintiffs and witnesses)<sup>11</sup>.

The book by Jacek Wijaczka therefore contributes to very rich and diversified international literature. The author is not a beginner to the subject, he has been conducting extensive studies in the archives and publishing, in a number of periodicals as well as collections of studies, articles concerning witchcraft trials that took place in the territory of the Polish Commonwealth between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the book discussed here, he concentrated on the Ducal Prussia, the territory which had many political and cultural bonds with the Commonwealth; thus the witchcraft trials on this area can be analysed both from the close comparative perspective (neighbours: the Polish-Lithuanian state, the southern Baltic shore, Scandinavia), as well as from the further, broader one (Germany, other European countries).

The work is based on thorough source search queries. The author conducted his studies in the former Königsberg Archives, which is now housed in Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin/Dahlem, and also in the Archives in Olsztyn and Poznań. As he concludes himself, he may have not been able to collect the data on all the trials (some extra information might still exist undiscovered in the nobility record offices), yet their majority have probably been explored. Based on this information, an interesting little map, which shows the number of trials in most significant places in the Ducal Prussia between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, was drawn up (page 16).

The work comprises the *Preface* (pp. 11–20), where sources, concepts, and terminology used in the book are discussed, four chapters, and the *Conclusion*. The first chapter (*The State and the Law*, pp. 21–44) presents the area covered by this study, its administrative divisions, the political system, binding law, and types of courts. It is, indeed, an indispensable background for the understanding of the essence and the course of witchcraft

<sup>11</sup> Bengt Ankarloo, Gustav Henningsen, eds., *Early Modern European Witchcraft. Centres and Peripheries*, Oxford 1990.

trials. The second chapter (*Witchcraft-hunts*, pp. 45–122) shows the chronology and the course of witchcraft trials in the Ducal Prussia against the European background (less emphasis was put on comparisons with the Polish–Lithuanian state). The author states that the beginning of witch-hunts is associated with the publishing of the *Hammer of Witches* (1487), though this phenomenon did not begin to occur on a mass scale until the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (yet it depended on local circumstances). In his attempts to explain the causes of those practices, the author recurses to the argument by a German historian F. I r s i g l e r, presented in 1998, but, perhaps, other works (English, French, Italian, Scandinavian), written either before or after 1998, and referring to this complex issue, should also have been taken into consideration. Moreover, the author, in his presentation of figures regarding the numbers of those sentenced to death penalty across Europe, fails to cite numerous latest works, however, he rightly underscores the need to correct old, exaggerated opinions. Interesting are the passages regarding the knowledge of contemporary times and witches in the Prussian Duchy, and, in particular, the chronology of the trials, in European writing; W i j a c z k a discovered 359 of them (table on p. 55). He also concluded that the time when the tides of trials intensified in the Ducal Prussia corresponded to the intensification of the tides of trials, according to W. B e h r i n g e r, in Bavaria. Witch-hunts in Prussia reached their peak in 1671–1690, which is associated by the author with war episodes, epidemics, high contributions and fiscal oppression. In his view, witchcraft trials were therefore a means for the society to recover from stress of everyday life, and the method to explain its causes in a simple way. This is the thesis formulated by a number of scholars, but it seems to be a certain oversimplification. Many other historians (A n k a r l o o, B a r o j a, G i n z b u r g), R. B r i g g s in particular, indicate the multiplicity and complexity of the reasons of this phenomenon<sup>12</sup>.

Of significant value is the fact-collecting record of trials which took place in the Ducal Prussia between 1534 and 1568 and in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (pp. 60–78), yet with a gap, unfortunate-

<sup>12</sup> Cf. R. B r i g g s, *Many Reasons Why: Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe. Studies in Culture and Belief*, eds. J. B a r r y, M. H e s t e r, G. R o b e r t s, Cambridge 1996.

ly, for the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the whole 17<sup>th</sup> century. It is not until further passages of the book where the reader finds the data on this issue, scattered over later parts of the work, which testifies to its structural defect. After this record there are passages where victims of witch-hunts are presented according to their sex (women, pp. 78–90, men pp. 91–104, children pp. 105–106). Separate room was given to the presentation of witches' daughters (pp. 107–111), even though they were also women, and midwives (pp. 112–115), so women again. The question why in most cases women were accused was answered by the author by referring to the opinions commonly expressed in this matter in the 16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> centuries (p. 78), even though, as a matter of fact, the issue is not that simple and is described in a large number of studies, which could serve as references for certain ideas to be compared with Prussian sources. Interesting are the author's reflections in the fragment on charging men with witchcraft (pp. 91–105). However, I cannot accept the view that men's magic was much more everyday life activities oriented than women's (p. 92). Almost all housework activities performed by women (preparing meals, nursing babies and the ill, decorating the house and farmyard for holidays and other occasions etc.) were for many centuries associated with the application of magic rituals. Numerous scholars indicate the dominance of women in "everyday" magic.

The section entitled *The Ducal Prussia Nobility and the Belief in Magic* (pp. 116–121) presents a couple of trials, whose files which reflect the opinions of a few representatives of the nobility regarding magic can be identified. They form, however, too small a basis to formulate broader views — to be successful one would have to reach for other sources, namely for the information on the nobility culture, their reading interests, libraries, correspondence, attitude towards theological discussions etc. It would also be worth confronting the nobility members' views with the views of townspeople and peasants — to find out whether there would be any differences between these groups within this scope and if so, to what extent? The whole passage would fit better in chapter four, which describes the world of beliefs of the inhabitants of the Ducal Prussia.

Chapter three (*The Court Proceedings in Witchcraft Trials*, pp. 123–228) presents this issue in the Ducal Prussia against

the comparative background of court proceedings in Western European countries. This is a very precious, well documented part of the book, which shows the development of the law and court practice from the Middle Ages until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The author rightly devoted his special attention to the role the University of Königsberg played in dealing with witchcraft cases.

Chapter four (*The Magic and Bewitched World of the Inhabitants*, pp. 229–296) includes a very interesting presentation of the Ducal Prussia inhabitants' opinions and beliefs regarding the world, the powers ruling it, ways events are controlled, misfortunes are prevented, the fight against or, alternatively, pacts with the devil. This is where the considerations concerning the beliefs in the Prussian nobility circles in magic would fit in against the background of the beliefs of commoners and townspeople, also the views of the members of intellectual elites (the circles of the University of Königsberg, theologians).

The *Conclusion* sums up the results of research queries carried out by the author — here he repeats the revealed number of 359 witchcraft trials where 440 women and 71 men were defendants (p.297). In conclusion, every ninth person sentenced for alleged witchcraft in the Ducal Prussia was a male — which was a far smaller number than the European average totalling 25 per cent. The author suggests the exploration and analysis of the circles of judges (also very little is known about executioners) as a postulate for future studies. At the end of the work, after the *Conclusion*, a very precious *Annex* was placed, which includes a chronological list of all the researched witchcraft trials (pp.301–336).

Jacek Wijaczka has done a great exploratory job and presented the previously unknown image of the problem. The book is full of historical facts, with a slightly failing construction and interpretation, especially as regards rich literature on the subject. The bibliography, placed at the end of the book (pp.338–354), mentions tens of works — next to the Polish ones are German and English (not so many French and Italian). However, surprising is the lack of such fundamental works as the widely discussed S. Clark, *Thinking with Demons. The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, Oxford 1997 and R. Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours*, London 1996, which opened a new stage in the process of understanding “madness of witch-hunts”. Of the Pol-

ish works, which should be used as an important comparative material, the bibliography lacks the studies by T. Wiślicz, *The Township of Kleczew and Its Neighbourhood Fighting the Devil, 1624–1700*, “Acta Poloniae Historica”, vol. 89, 2004; and M. Pilaśzek, (among others: *Witch-Hunts in Poland 16<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, “Acta Poloniae Historica”, vol. 86, 2002, eadem, *The Lithuanian Witch Trials in the 16<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, “Odrodzenie i Reformacja w Polsce” (“The Renaissance and the Reformation in Poland”), vol. 46, 2002).

Despite some critical remarks, this book, especially as regards the collected and presented, extremely abundant fact-collecting material, should be regarded as a significant step forward in the studies on this important, international subject of the early modern times. It is a great pity that this pioneering book was not accompanied by a foreign language summary, which would, at least in an abridged form, acquaint with the contents those researchers who are not familiar with the Polish language. Jacek Wijaczka has joined in an important trend in international research and one has to regret that the results of his studies will only partially penetrate the awareness of foreign scholars.

(Translated by Robert Bubczyk)