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Abstract

This thesis investigates the European witch hunts between 1450 and 1750 as structured responses to social, political, economic, and ecological transformations rather than as irrational outbreaks of superstition. It argues that witch hunts fulfilled a dual role: they operated as scapegoating mechanisms through which communities externalized anxieties about hunger, disease, and instability, and they were simultaneously employed by secular and ecclesiastical authorities to consolidate power, enforce discipline, and legitimize hierarchies.

The analysis is guided by five central research questions that address economic transformations, state formation and legal pluralism, religious reform, intersecting hierarchies of identity, and ecological disruptions during the Little Ice Age. To answer these, the study combines archival records, legal statutes, theological texts, demographic data, and comparative historiography with a qualitative case study of Poland. The Polish experience, marked by a decentralized judiciary and religious pluralism, both mirrored broader European developments and displayed distinct local dynamics.

The theoretical framework integrates feminist sociology, intersectionality, queer and trans liberation theory, and moral panic studies. Federici's analysis of primitive accumulation situates witch hunts within the disciplining of women's reproductive and productive labour. Intersectionality highlights compounded vulnerabilities across gender, class, and belief systems. Trans liberation theory emphasizes the policing of non-normative bodies, while Cohen's concept of moral panic reveals how crises were translated into targeted violence.

The findings demonstrate that witch hunts were central to the reorganization of gender and labour during the transition to capitalism, to the consolidation of political and religious authority, and to the symbolic management of ecological disaster. By situating witch hunts within International Development Studies, the thesis underscores their continuing relevance for understanding how scapegoating, gendered violence, and moral panic emerge in times of structural transformation.

Abstract (Deutsch)

Diese Arbeit untersucht die europäischen Hexenverfolgungen zwischen 1450 und 1750 nicht als irrationale Ausbrüche von Aberglauben, sondern als strukturierte Reaktionen auf tiefgreifende soziale, politische, ökonomische und ökologische Umbrüche. Sie vertritt die These, dass Hexenjagden eine doppelte Funktion erfüllten: Einerseits dienten sie als Mechanismus der Sündenbockzuschreibung, durch den Gemeinschaften Ängste vor Hunger,

Krankheit und Instabilität externalisierten. Andererseits wurden sie von weltlichen und kirchlichen Autoritäten gezielt eingesetzt, um Macht zu konsolidieren, Disziplin durchzusetzen und neue Hierarchien zu legitimieren.

Die Analyse folgt fünf zentralen Forschungsfragen, die sich mit ökonomischen Transformationen, Staatsbildung und Rechtspluralismus, religiösen Reformbewegungen, den Überschneidungen sozialer Hierarchien sowie den ökologischen Krisen der „Kleinen Eiszeit" befassen. Zur Beantwortung dieser Fragen werden Gerichtsakten, Rechtsquellen, theologische Schriften, demographische Daten und vergleichende Historiographie herangezogen. Ergänzt wird dies durch eine qualitative Fallstudie zu Polen, dessen dezentralisiertes Rechtssystem und religiöse Pluralität sowohl europäische Entwicklungen widerspiegelten als auch spezifische regionale Ausprägungen zeigten.

Der theoretische Rahmen verbindet feministische Soziologie, Intersektionalität, Queer- und Transbefreiungstheorie sowie das Konzept der moral panic. Federicis Analyse der ursprünglichen Akkumulation verortet Hexenverfolgungen in der Disziplinierung weiblicher Reproduktions- und Arbeitskraft. Intersektionalität verdeutlicht, wie sich Verwundbarkeiten an den Schnittstellen von Geschlecht, Klasse und Glauben verdichteten. Die Transbefreiungsperspektive macht sichtbar, wie nicht-normative Körper überwacht und sanktioniert wurden, während Cohens Theorie der moral panic erklärt, wie gesellschaftliche Krisen in gezielte Gewalt übersetzt wurden.

Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Hexenjagden eine zentrale Rolle bei der Reorganisation von Geschlechter- und Arbeitsverhältnissen im Übergang zum Kapitalismus, bei der Festigung politisch-religiöser Autorität und bei der symbolischen Bewältigung ökologischer Katastrophen spielten. Durch die Einbettung in die International Development Studies wird ihre heutige Relevanz deutlich: Hexenverfolgungen veranschaulichen, wie Sündenbockmechanismen, geschlechtsspezifische Gewalt und moral panic in Zeiten struktureller Umbrüche entstehen und wirksam bleiben.

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1. Introduction

The European witch hunts, which took place between roughly 1450 and 1750, constitute one of the most striking and tragic phenomena of early modern history. These persecutions were written off for generations as the illogical holdovers of a pre-modern worldview or as outbreaks of mass superstition. Recent studies, however, have demonstrated that witch hunts cannot be reduced to mass delusion. They were instead embedded within broader transformations of European society: the decline of feudal structures, the rise of early capitalism, the centralization of political power, the fragmentation of religious authority, and the ecological disruptions of the Little Ice Age. Accusations of witchcraft did not just arise out of superstition and a fear of magic. They functioned as tools of social regulation, political control, and economic restructuring.

This thesis contends that witch hunts served a dual role. On the one hand, they acted as scapegoating mechanisms through which communities externalized their anxieties about hunger, disease, poverty, and instability. On the other hand, they were consciously employed by authorities, both secular and ecclesiastical, to reinforce discipline, consolidate power, and legitimize emerging hierarchies. The figure of the witch thus embodied not only supernatural fear, but also the contested terrain of gender, labour, and authority in a period of profound change.

In order to analyse these dynamics, this study draws upon a combination of archival trial records, quantitative demographic data, and a wide body of secondary scholarship. A qualitative and comparative research design enables the integration of local case studies into a broader European framework, with particular attention to Poland, where witchcraft persecution reflected both continental trends and distinctive regional conditions. This method allows to follow the interactions between local customs, folk beliefs, and community dynamics and structural pressures, economic changes, political power, religious turmoil, and ecological disasters.

The analysis is guided by five central research questions. First, what economic transformations made witch hunts both possible and appealing to local elites? Second, how did processes of state formation, judicial authority, and legal pluralism shape the scale and character of prosecutions? Third, in what ways did religious reform, counter-reform, and confessional rivalry lend legitimacy to the persecution of witches? Fourth, how did intersecting hierarchies of gender, class, belief, and region influence patterns of accusation, trial, and punishment? Fifth, how did ecological disruptions associated with the Little Ice Age contribute to moral panic and the search for scapegoats? These questions frame the structure of the thesis and orient the case study of Poland within wider European developments.

The theoretical framework employed here brings together insights from feminist sociology, intersectionality, queer and trans liberation theory, and moral panic studies. Silvia Federici's analysis in Caliban and the Witch positions witch hunts as integral to primitive accumulation, linking gendered violence to the rise of capitalism and the disciplining of reproductive labour. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality provides a lens for examining how vulnerabilities were compounded at the intersections of gender, class, religion, and regional identity. Leslie Feinberg's Transgender Liberation illuminates how the policing of gender variance has historically reinforced broader systems of social control, connecting the persecution of witches to the regulation of bodies and identities. Finally, Stanley Cohen's moral panic theory explains how periods of crisis, whether economic, religious, or ecological, generated symbolic threats that were projected onto "folk devils," legitimizing harsh measures and violent repression. By weaving together these theoretical perspectives, the thesis develops a multidimensional framework for understanding witch hunts as both historically specific events and structurally recurring patterns of governance through fear.

This study makes two contributions to the field. First, it situates the European witch hunts within the discipline of International Development Studies, treating them not as isolated episodes of irrational violence but as structured responses to crises of transition, comparable in logic to contemporary forms of gendered scapegoating and social exclusion. Second, by focusing on Poland as a case study, it demonstrates the importance of regional diversity and local dynamics in shaping how universal forces of political economy, religion, and ecology played out in practice. The Polish experience, characterized by a decentralized judicial system, religious pluralism, and strong communal traditions, provides a critical lens for re-examining the European witch craze as a whole.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that witch hunts were neither marginal nor accidental in European history. They were central to the processes by which societies adapted to economic, political, and ecological change, and they left enduring legacies in the regulation of gender, labour, and collective fear. By examining both the universal forces that produced persecution and the particularities of the Polish case, this study seeks to deepen our understanding of how violence has historically functioned as a form of governance, and how its echoes continue to shape contemporary struggles over gender, authority, and survival.

The structure of the thesis reflects these aims. Chapter 2 sets out the methodology, including the research design, data sources, and analytical procedures that underpin the study.

Chapter 3 situates witch hunts within the field of International Development Studies, establishing their relevance as patterned responses to social and economic transformation rather than isolated episodes of superstition. Chapter 4 introduces the theoretical framework, integrating feminist sociology, intersectionality, queer and trans liberation, and moral panic theory in order to provide a multidimensional analytical lens. Chapters 5 through 7 trace the historical trajectory of witchcraft and persecution in Europe: beginning with antiquity and medieval perceptions, analysing the causes of witch hunts across economic, political, religious, and ecological dimensions, and concluding with the eventual decline of trials. Chapter 8 turns to Poland as a detailed case study, highlighting how broader European dynamics were refracted through local legal traditions, religious pluralism, and community structures. Finally, Chapter 9 synthesizes the findings, directly addresses the central research questions, and reflects on the implications of the study for both historical scholarship and contemporary debates about gendered violence, scapegoating, and social regulation.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

A qualitative historical research design forms the foundation of this study. A mixed-method approach has been adopted to integrate archival investigation, textual analysis, and comparative case study analysis. This combination facilitates the exploration of the complex interplay between socio-political forces and economic transformations, as well as religious conflicts and gendered dynamics that influenced the witch hunts. The chosen design enables an in-depth understanding of the multifaceted nature of the subject while situating regional phenomena, such as the case of Poland, within broader European developments.

2.2 Data Sources and Collection

This study relies on a diverse body of primary and secondary sources in order to capture both the breadth of the European witch hunts and the specificity of the Polish case study. The aim is to combine archival material, legal and theological texts, quantitative evidence, and interpretive scholarship in a way that allows for both macro-level comparison and micro-level analysis of individual trials.

Primary sources form the foundation of this research. Archival trial records, where they survive, provide direct access to the language of accusation, the procedures of interrogation, and the strategies of defense employed by the accused. These documents, though fragmentary and often mediated by scribes or magistrates, offer invaluable insight into the lived experience of persecution and the ways in which communities articulated suspicion and fear. Legal statutes, municipal ordinances, and canonical decrees supply the normative framework within which witchcraft was defined as a crime and prosecuted in courts. The demonological literature, including Heinrich Kramer and Jakob Sprenger's Malleus Maleficarum (1487), demonstrates how clerical and judicial elites systematized the image of the witch and provided theological and juridical justification for persecution. Sermons, pamphlets, and treatises circulating across Europe further reveal how these ideas were disseminated and adapted to different local contexts.

These qualitative sources are supplemented by demographic and quantitative data. Correlations between ecological catastrophe and waves of accusations of witchcraft can be found using population figures, famine records, mortality rates, and climate data from the Little Ice Age. When combined with trial data, these resources enable the testing of hypotheses regarding the connection between scapegoating behaviors and subsistence stress.

Secondary literature plays a crucial role in contextualizing and interpreting these sources. Brian P. Levack's *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* provides a comprehensive overview of continental patterns, while Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* frames witch hunts within the political economy of primitive accumulation and gendered violence. Emily Oster's econometric analysis of climate and witchcraft, alongside Edward Miguel's research on contemporary witch killings in Tanzania, provides comparative evidence linking ecological shocks to scapegoating dynamics. In addition, works by historians such as Robin Briggs, Lyndal Roper, and Christina Larner deepen the understanding of regional differences in prosecution, while feminist historiography by Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English situates witch hunts within the history of women's labour and medical knowledge.

Special emphasis is placed on Polish scholarship, which is indispensable for reconstructing the Commonwealth's unique trajectory. The works of Małgorzata Pilaszek, Jacek Wijaczka, Michael Ostling, and Wanda Wyporska provide critical insights into trial procedures, local beliefs, and the regional distribution of accusations. Their studies, many based on extensive archival research, allow this thesis to move beyond generalizations and to situate Poland within broader European developments while attending to its distinctive political and cultural environment.

This eclectic source base reflects the interdisciplinary orientation of the thesis. By integrating archival records, legal and theological texts, demographic data, and a wide range of historiography, the study can capture both the structural dimensions of witch hunts and the lived realities of those who endured them. The combination of sources also reflects the layered approach of the theoretical framework: feminist sociology directs attention to gendered patterns in both law and testimony; intersectionality foregrounds compounded vulnerabilities; trans liberation theory encourages attention to the policing of non-normative bodies; and moral panic theory highlights how ecological and social crises were translated into collective fears and judicial action.

2.3 Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis was executed through several carefully structured stages to maintain both depth and contextual accuracy. A qualitative content analysis was applied to identify recurring themes such as economic decline, state formation, religious influence, and manifestations of gendered violence. A comparative historical analysis further explained regional distinctions by contrasting the case of Poland with broader European trends. An interdisciplinary interpretative framework, drawing on legal history, economic sociology, and gender studies, supported a nuanced examination of the texts while remaining attentive to the historical context.

2.4 Case Study Approach

A more in-depth case study of the witch hunts in Poland is central to this research. This approach examines the localized manifestation of wider European influences by investigating the impacts of power struggles on regional legal practices and the consequences of the transition from feudal systems to emerging market economies. Special emphasis is placed on the dynamics of gendered scapegoating and the role of land conflicts within these transformations. Uniform analytical parameters across cases have been maintained to facilitate meaningful comparisons between the Polish experience and other European regions, thereby highlighting both unique and common structural factors.

2.5 Limitations

No study of early modern witch hunts can escape the methodological challenges posed by its sources. The archival record is fragmentary, regionally uneven, and shaped by the priorities of the institutions that produced it. Trial transcripts, for instance, rarely preserve the unmediated voices of the accused; they were written by clerks, filtered through legal formulae, and often coerced through torture or intimidation. As such, they reveal more about the expectations of authorities and the cultural scripts of confession than about the lived experiences of those accused. While close reading can recover traces of agency, resistance, and local knowledge, the distortions of the record must be acknowledged.

A second limitation concerns legal and administrative bias. Most surviving documents were authored by elites: judges, priests, magistrates whose interests in reinforcing order and authority inevitably colored their representations of events. Accusations and verdicts thus reflect not only community tensions but also the deliberate strategies of ruling groups. This study addresses such bias by situating legal sources alongside folk traditions, sermons, pamphlets, and the broader social context in which they circulated. Nevertheless, the partiality of the record remains a significant constraint.

A third limitation is the uneven geographical and temporal distribution of data. Records from Western Europe, particularly Germany, France, and England, are more abundant and have received far greater scholarly attention than those from Central and Eastern Europe. Poland's archives are comparatively sparse, with many local court records lost to war, decay, or neglect. As a result, generalizations must be made cautiously, with recognition that extant material may overrepresent certain regions or types of cases while leaving others invisible.

Finally, theoretical frameworks themselves impose constraints. Concepts such as feminist sociology, intersectionality, trans liberation, and moral panic originate in contemporary scholarship and political struggle. They provide invaluable tools for analyzing structures of power, but their application risks projecting modern categories onto historical phenomena. This thesis seeks to use these frameworks to illuminate patterns and structures, rather than to retroactively ascribe identities or motivations that may not have been available to early modern actors. Still, the interpretive tension between present-day theory and historical context remains a methodological challenge.

By acknowledging these limitations, the study does not seek to diminish the value of its sources or frameworks, but rather to demonstrate transparency in method and to situate its findings within the constraints of the available evidence. Recognizing the silences, biases, and asymmetries of the record allows for a more cautious and critical engagement with the history of witch hunts, while still drawing out the insights they provide into the dynamics of gender, power, and social transformation.

3. Situating Witch Hunts within International Development Studies

When viewed through the lens of International Development, the European witch hunts that happened between roughly 1450 and 1750 were not random outbreaks of superstition, but highly patterned responses to economic, legal, and social changes. Historians such as Levack

(Levack 2016) have shown that there persecutions coincided with the expansion of centralized judicial authority and the decline of local customary protections, changes that allowed class and gender biases to be embedded into the law itself. The shift to inquisitorial procedures meant that rumour and fear could be turned into formal accusations and convictions. Economic historians have connected spikes in trials to moments of profound livelihood disruption, including the enclosure of common land, the commercialisation of agriculture and climatic shocks. Hudson´s study from 2016, for example, shows that a single degree drop in average temperature could correlate with a dramatic rise in prosecutions.

From a feminist political economy perspective, Federici (2004) argues that witch hunts were part of the process of primitive accumulation: they disciplined women´s reproductive and productive labour to serve emerging capitalist markets. In this reading, the violence was not incidental but functional, clearing the way for new forms of property, labour discipline and patriarchal control. These historical processes find echoes in the present. Li´s research in *The Will to Improve* (Li 2007) documents how well-intentioned development schemes in Indonesia restructured access to land, forest, and credit, often criminalizing subsistence livelihoods in the process.

In both early modern Europe and present-day Tanzania, climate shocks have intersected with entrenched social hierarchies to produce scapegoating forms. During the Little Ice Age, successive poor harvests strained subsistence economies, amplifying local tensions and contributing to waves of witchcraft accusations against socially marginal women. A similar pattern is evident in contemporary rural Tanzania, where rainfall variability and drought could trigger spikes in the killing of elderly women accused of witchcraft. As Miguel´s econometric analysis (Miguel 2005) demonstrates, negative rainfall shocks correlate with these attacks, suggesting that communities under acute livelihood stress seek to externalise, blame, and reassert control by targeting those least able to defend themselves. In both contexts, the violence operates as a grim form of crisis management. Rather than addressing the structural causes of scarcity, it reframes them as the malice of an identifiable "other," thereby reinforcing existing gendered and generational fault lines while offering a false sense of resolution to subsistence crises.

Seeing witch hunts through this wider comparative frame allows to treat them as forms of socio-economic governance that arose when markets, states, and laws were reorganised faster than rights and protections could adjust. In both early modern Europe and today´s Global South, these moment of restructuring have produced violence that targets those with the least protection, especially women whose work and access to resources are vital to community survival.

3.1 Witch Hunts and the Political Economy of Development

Development scholars have long recognized that patterns of exclusion, resource dispossession, and violence often accompany periods of economic transformation. James C. Scott's seminal work, *Weapons of the Weak*, shows how rural populations employ "everyday forms of resistance," such as foot-dragging, sabotage, and non-compliance, to counteract the pressures of market integration, state-building, and land commodification (Scott 1985). These subtle acts of defiance highlight the agency of marginalized groups in resisting top-down economic reforms that threaten their traditional livelihoods.

Tania Murray Li's *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (2007) offers a powerful framework for understanding how development interventions, even when well-intentioned, can reconfigure access to land, labour, and resources in ways that deepen inequality. Drawing on Foucault's concept of governmentality, Li argues that development operates through a "will to improve" that renders domains technical and governs through programs, training, and law: "To render a domain technical is to delimit what is to be governed, and how" (Li 2007: 7). Her case studies from Indonesia, particularly the establishment of Lore Lindu National Park, show how conservation boundaries criminalized subsistence practices, turning villagers into "illegal squatters" (Li 2007: 5). These dynamics resonate strongly with the European witch hunts of the early modern period, which similarly emerged during moments of economic and legal restructuring. As Levack notes, the consolidation of state judicial authority and the erosion of customary protections embedded gendered and class-based biases into legal systems, enabling authorities to translate rumour and anxiety into prosecutable offenses (Levack 2016: 79–84). Federici's Marxist-feminist analysis situates witch hunts within the logic of primitive accumulation, arguing they disciplined women's reproductive and productive labour to serve the needs of nascent capitalism: "The witch was the scapegoat for all the evils of the time" (Federici 2004: 170). Both Li and Federici highlight how interventions, whether framed as development or moral purification, targeted women's roles in subsistence economies, criminalizing their labour and marginalizing their voices. Even participatory programs in Indonesia, Li observes, often mobilized women's labour without including them in decision-making: "Women's labour was mobilized, but their voices were rarely heard in planning meetings" (Li 2007: 284). Crucially, both contexts also reveal the agency of those affected. Li documents how villagers negotiated, evaded, and sometimes mobilized politically against development schemes (Li 2007: 15), while Levack shows that communities occasionally resisted witch trials, especially when they served elite interests such as land confiscation (Levack 2016: 81–83). Together, these studies underscore how socio-economic governance, whether through development or persecution, can produce violence and exclusion when it ignores local contexts, gendered power relations, and the distributive effects of change.

The legal and social responses to these crises frequently targeted individuals deemed socially expendable or threatening to emerging hierarchies. Women, particularly widows, healers, midwives, and the poor, were the main victims of witchcraft accusations, not only due to supernatural beliefs, but because they represented obstacles to new forms of economic and social control. Silvia Federici contends that witch hunts were part of a broader process of disciplining female labour and asserting patriarchal control over reproduction and property during the transition to capitalism (Federici 2004). This historical perspective resonates with contemporary development issues, where gendered dimensions of land dispossession, labour marginalization, and legal exclusion continue to shape patterns of violence and inequality in the Global South and Global North.

3.2 Legal Pluralism, Customary Law, and Social Violence

Another critical intersection with International Development lies in the role of law as both a tool of exclusion and a site of resistance. The European witch hunts unfolded within a legal framework, characterized by overlapping ecclesiastical, secular, and customary courts competing for being the main organ for jurisdiction. In decentralized regions like the Holy Roman Empire, local secular courts often conducted the most brutal prosecutions, driven by local political conflicts and economic interests. This scenario parallels contemporary situations in parts of Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, where state law, customary law, and informal justice mechanisms operate simultaneously, often producing legal uncertainty and reinforcing patriarchal and elite control over land and labour (Merry 1988; Ubink 2008).

In modern development contexts, "witch hunts" have not disappeared. In parts of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, accusations of witchcraft continue to serve as tools for resolving land disputes, eliminating rivals, and policing gender norms. Edward Miguel's research in Tanzania demonstrates that economic shocks, such as droughts, correlate with increased witch killings, particularly targeting elderly women (Miguel 2005). Similarly, Mensah Adinkrah's study of Ghana reveals that witchcraft accusations often lead to lethal violence against women, reflecting deep-seated gender biases and social tensions (Adinkrah 2004).

Scholars like Peter Geschiere argue that witchcraft accusations in contemporary Africa often emerge during periods of rapid economic and social change, where wealth disparities and disruptions to customary authority structures generate anxieties about social cohesion (Geschiere 1997). Thus, the European witch hunts provide an instructive historical analogue for understanding how economic stress, legal ambiguity, and gendered scapegoating function in transitional societies. Recognizing these patterns is essential for developing legal and policy frameworks that address the root causes of social violence and promote equitable development.

3.3 Gendered Violence and the Political Economy of Fear

One of the clearest contributions of historical witch hunts to International Development studies lies in their illumination of gendered violence as a fundamental tool of social and economic regulation. As Roper and Wiesner-Hanks have shown, early modern witch trials disproportionately targeted women who existed outside male-dominated social structures: widows without male protectors, healers who challenged male medical authority, and market women competing with guild tradesmen (Roper 2006: 58; Wiesner-Hanks 2019: 135). These prosecutions were not random acts of superstition. Rather, they systematically reflected and reinforced the gendered divisions of labour and authority emerging in early capitalist societies. Women's economic independence and alternative forms of knowledge were perceived as existential threats to new economic orders predicated on male dominance in both public and private spheres. Witch hunts, then, became one mechanism among many for criminalizing female autonomy and reasserting patriarchal control at moments of profound economic and social change.

Contemporary development research similarly identifies gendered violence as both a consequence and a mechanism of socio-economic inequality. Institutions like the World Bank now recognize that gender-based violence (GBV) not only devastates individuals but also fundamentally undermines economic development, estimating that violence against women can cost nations up to 3.7% of their GDP, often more than they spend on education (World Bank 2023, online). In contexts of rapid economic transformation, such as urbanization or shifts to neoliberal market systems, violence against women frequently serves to manage the uncertainties and dislocations these changes provoke. For instance, Goldstein's ethnographic work in Bolivia reveals how informal market women, predominantly female vendors excluded from formal economies, are subject to routine harassment and violence by state forces as a way of policing and controlling informal economies that challenge elite interests (Goldstein 2013: 119). Similarly, Khadiagala's study of land grabs in Uganda highlights how widows are often displaced through both legal and extra-legal violence, their marginalization ensuring that valuable resources remain under patriarchal or corporate control (Khadiagala 2002: 203).

Recent research has deepened this understanding by showing how economic restructuring, particularly under globalization, creates new spaces where gendered violence thrives. Free Trade Zones (FTZs), often promoted as engines of economic development, have been repeatedly criticized for fostering environments where women workers are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse due to lax labour regulations and weakened state protections. Scholars argue that these zones create what Melissa Wright calls "zones of indistinction," where women's bodies become expendable under the logic of profit maximization (Wright 82). Such environments echo the historical dynamics of the witch hunts, where social and economic instability was resolved by displacing insecurity onto marginalized female bodies. This insight highlights how the political economy of fear continues to function: communities and institutions mobilize violence not merely as expressions of prejudice but as deliberate strategies for managing systemic transformation.

Another dimension receiving growing attention is the rise of economic violence within intimate relationships, where perpetrators exert control by limiting victims' access to financial resources. Economic abuse, recently recognized in the UK's Domestic Abuse Act of 2021, demonstrates that financial dependence is both a form and a tool of gendered violence ("Economic Abuse"). According to recent studies, economic abuse is often a hidden but devastating factor preventing women from leaving violent relationships, further deepening gendered inequalities (Nelson 2023, online). This evolving recognition of economic violence reinforces the argument that financial autonomy is central to women's safety and empowerment, a theme deeply resonant with historical patterns where women's economic independence triggered violent backlash.

The persistence of discriminatory social norms also remains a significant barrier to progress. According to the 2023 Gender Social Norms Index, more than 80% of men and women globally still harbour biases that justify restrictions on women's rights, including tolerance for intimate partner violence ("Gender Social Norms Index 2023"). Such attitudes illustrate how gendered violence is not simply the product of individual malice but is embedded in broader structures of inequality.

By examining early modern witch hunts alongside contemporary forms of gendered violence, this thesis proposes that both historical and modern societies have used the political economy of fear to stabilize systems in crisis, mobilizing violence to reassert hierarchies threatened by social and economic change. Understanding these continuities offers valuable historical insights for designing development strategies that do not reproduce patterns of exclusion and violence.

3.4 Development Lessons from Historical Violence

Ultimately, the European witch hunts can teach and remind development scholars that legal reforms, economic restructuring, and market expansion are never politically or socially neutral processes. They generate winners and losers and can often trigger social violence against those rendered disposable by new economic orders. The historical patterns of land dispossession, labour marginalization, and gendered scapegoating seen in early modern Europe continue to inform contemporary struggles over resources, livelihoods, and legal rights in the Global South.

This thesis thus contributes to International Development by offering a case study in the political, economic, and gendered dimensions of social violence during periods of structural transition. It demonstrates the value of historically informed analysis for understanding the social costs of economic development, the enduring legacies of legal pluralism, and the intersection of gender, law, and labour in the production of inequality. In doing so, it advocates for development policies that address the socio-legal foundations of marginalization, integrate gender-sensitive land and labour reforms, and remain attentive to the historical roots of social exclusion and scapegoating practices.

4. Theoretical Framework: (Feminist) Sociology, Witchcraft, and Trans Liberation

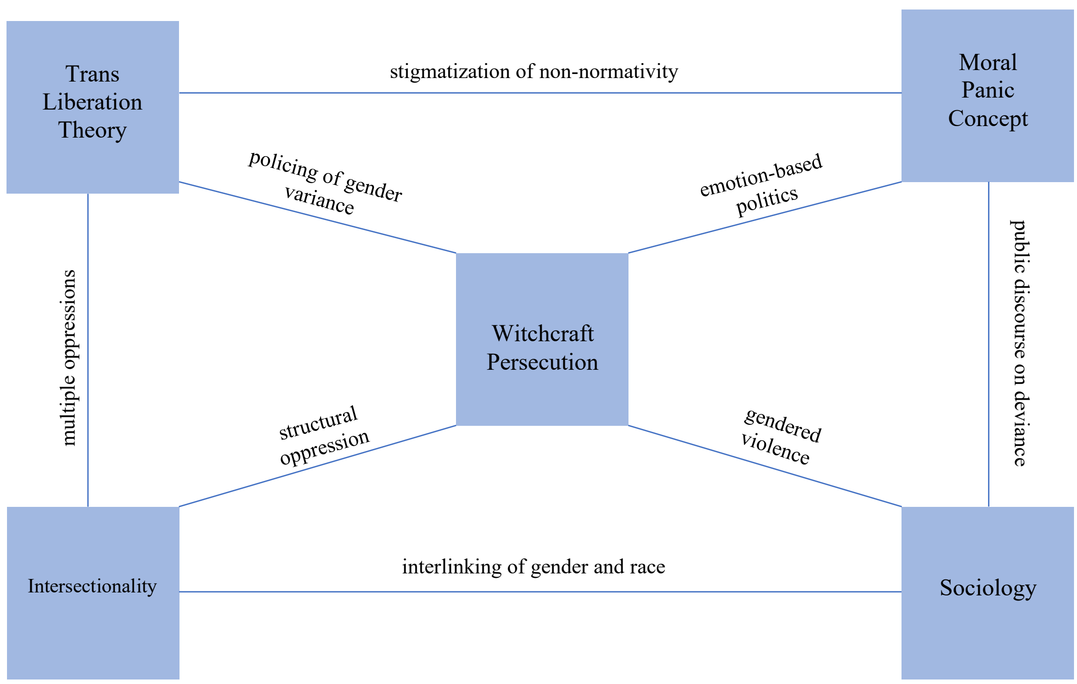
4.1 Introduction to the Theory

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework guiding the analysis of witchcraft persecution in Europe, situating it within feminist sociology, intersectional theory, and queer/trans liberation politics. The aim is to interrogate witch hunts as socially constructed phenomena rooted in systems of patriarchal power systems, gendered violence, and economic transformation, as emphasized by sociologists. Witch hunts can be read as a part of a broader political agenda of fear, in which violence against women and gender-nonconforming people served to discipline communities, enforce patriarchal norms, and secure control over labour and resources. By integrating Leslie Feinberg´s *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose*

Time Has Come with feminist historiography and moral panic concept, this chapter establishes a lens through which witch hunts can be understood as both historically specific and structurally resonant with contemporary gendered oppressions.

4.1.1 Theory Map

The theory map below synthesizes this chapter´s conceptual structure. The map positions Witchcraft Persecution in the central position, with four theoretical lenses radiating out to illustrate different dimensions of the phenomenon. Sociology draws the attention to the gendered violence and patriarchal structures that are the bases of the hunts. Intersectionality reveals how gender, class, race, religion, and other identities overlap to shape who became a target. Trans liberation highlights the policing of gender diversity and the necessity of solidarity across marginalized groups. The moral panic concept uncovers the emotional dynamics and symbolic threats that authorities and communities used to justify persecution. The connections between these lenses show how they reinforce and deepen one another: feminist sociology and intersectionality jointly analyse gender and race/class oppression. Intersectionality and trans liberation focus on compounded marginalizations. Trans liberation and moral panic explain how non-normative identities are stigmatised in moment of collective fear. Finally, (feminist) sociology and moral panic together demonstrate how public discourse about what is seen as deviance serves to maintain patriarchal control. This visual serves as a guide through the layered structural, identity-based processes that are explored in the next chapters.



4.2 Intersectionality as an Analytical Tool

Intersectionality foregrounds the reality that various identity aspects shape the experiences of oppression. Kimberlé Crenshaw´s concept provides a framework for understanding how gender oppression in witch hunts was compounded by class, ethnicity, religion, and other identity axes. In her 1989 “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” essay, intersectionality critiques legal and sociological frameworks that isolate identity categories and thus overlook the compounded vulnerabilities faced by those inhabiting multiple positions (Crenshaw 1989: 139-167). While the majority of accused witches were women (even though source to source exact numbers differ, as it can be hard to provide a specific percentage due to many sources no longer being available, it is still clear that each source proves that women were the majority), not all women were equally vulnerable. Those closer to the margins of social hierarchies were more likely to be accused and executed. Intersectionality allows us to see witch hunts as a centre of various overlapping oppressions rather than a simple phenomenon.

This is further explained by Silvia Federici in *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), as she writes about women in slavery, “Ironically then, it would seem that in slavery women "achieved" a rough equality with the men of their class (Momsen 1993). But their treatment was never the same. Women were given less to eat; unlike men, they were vulnerable to their masters' sexual assaults; and more cruel punishment were inflicted on them, for in addition to the physical agony women had to bear the sexual humiliation always attached to them and the damage done, when pregnant, to the fetuses they carried.” (Federici 2004: 112) Even though the men were as enslaved as the women, they still received better treatment and being a woman contributed to their social situations for the worse.

4.3 Queer and Trans Perspectives on Historical Persecution

Leslie Feinberg´s *Transgender Liberation* argues that struggles against gender oppression are inseparable from struggles against class exploitation and racial oppression, “Engels and Marx saw Morgan´s studies further as proof that the modern-day oppression of women was rooted in the cleavage of society into classes based on private ownership and property.” (Feinberg 1992: 9) Feinberg situates trans and gender non-conforming people within a long history of resistance to the rigid gender binaries. Feinberg shows that institutionalized bigotry against transgender people did not emerge in a vacuum but alongside, and as part of, the same tactics used by slave-owners, feudal lords, and capitalist elites to fragment working-class solidarity. As Feinberg observes, “Like racism and all forms of prejudice, bigotry toward transgendered people is a deadly carcinogen. We are pitted against each other in order to keep us from seeing each other as allies.” (Feinberg 1992: 22) By linking transphobia to the rise of exploitative labour relations and to systems of racial hierarchy, Feinberg insists that any struggle for gender justice must also confront economic and racial injustice.

Central to Feinberg’s argument is the assertion that the very categories of gender and sexuality were shaped, policed, and weaponized by ruling classes seeking to control labour and reinforce social hierarchies. She documents how, from the plantations to the factories and tenements of the twentieth century, transgender and gender-nonconforming people have often been among the most precariously employed and the most brutalized, not because of inherent deviance, but because their existence threatened the rigid norms that held exploitative systems in place. (Feinberg 1992: 10-17)

This is a history that can also be traced back to the persecution of those who defied normative roles in earlier societies. Feinberg´s emphasis on coalition-building across oppressed groups is relevant, as witch hunts targeted not only women, but also healers, religious minorities, and those whose livelihoods or beliefs challenged dominant power structures. Understanding these persecutions through a trans liberation lens helps understand the shared stakes in resisting gendered and sexual oppression.

4.4 Moral Panic as a Theoretical Lens

The concept of moral panic provides a vital framework for understanding how witch hunts transformed diffuse social anxieties into targeted forms of persecution. Stanley Cohen’s seminal Folk Devils and Moral Panics (1972) conceptualizes moral panic as a process whereby a group is defined as a threat to societal values, portrayed as dangerous by “moral entrepreneurs,” and subjected to disproportionate hostility and punishment. Cohen identifies five key features of moral panic: heightened public concern, increased hostility toward the accused, a consensus that the threat is real and serious, a disproportionate response, and volatility in the duration of panic. Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda (1994) later expanded this model by emphasizing the role of power, ideology, and media in amplifying fear.

Applied to early modern Europe, moral panic theory reveals that witchcraft accusations did not arise spontaneously from popular superstition. Instead, they were systematically cultivated and harnessed by authorities as tools of governance. As Stuart Hall and colleagues argue in Policing the Crisis (1978), moral panics often operate as ideological strategies through which ruling groups respond to structural crises by shifting blame onto stigmatized populations. This insight is crucial for interpreting the witch hunts: ecclesiastical and secular elites functioned as moral entrepreneurs who amplified fear of maleficium in order to consolidate power, enforce religious orthodoxy, and secure obedience. Witch hunts thus exemplify how moral panic can operate not merely as collective delusion, but as a deliberate mechanism of social regulation.

A feminist and intersectional lens further clarifies why witches, in particular, became the quintessential folk devils of the period. As Silvia Federici (2004) demonstrates, accusations disproportionately targeted women whose reproductive and healing roles threatened emerging capitalist orders. Intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) illuminates how vulnerability was compounded by age, class, ethnicity, and marital status: widows, healers, and poor women without male protectors were far more likely to be accused. In this sense, moral panic was not a neutral social process but one deeply shaped by patriarchal and economic hierarchies. Panic selected its victims from those who were already marginalized, rendering their bodies expendable while reaffirming the social order.

Ecological crises provided powerful triggers for these dynamics. As scholars such as Wolfgang Behringer (1999) and Emily Oster (2004) have shown, climatic volatility during the Little Ice Age produced recurring famines, epidemics, and crop failures. These material shocks generated diffuse anxieties that required symbolic resolution. Witchcraft accusations translated otherwise inexplicable misfortune into narratives of malice and conspiracy. By casting women as the agents of ecological catastrophe, moral panic reframed structural crises of subsistence and governance as the product of individual deviance, thereby displacing attention away from systemic causes.

Contemporary scholarship further highlights the persistence of moral panic as a mechanism of social control. In the present, panics surrounding "gender ideology" and transgender rights echo the witch craze in their mobilization of fear around non-normative bodies. As Shoshana Magnet (2011) and Leslie Feinberg (1992) argue, such panics reinforce patriarchal authority by depicting gender variance as a threat to social order. Similarly, Edward Miguel's econometric study of Tanzania (2005) demonstrates that droughts correlate with spikes in witch killings, particularly of elderly women, underscoring the structural continuity between early modern Europe and contemporary Global South contexts. In both cases, panic displaces systemic anxieties, whether ecological crisis, economic insecurity, or political instability, onto vulnerable populations.

While some scholars have critiqued the moral panic framework for overemphasizing media-driven processes in modern societies (Critcher 2003), its application to early modern Europe remains valuable when adapted to account for oral culture, sermons, pamphlets, and communal rumour as mechanisms of amplification. Moreover, when combined with feminist sociology and intersectionality, moral panic theory provides a powerful tool for understanding not only the collective dynamics of fear but also the structural inequalities that determine who becomes the target of persecution.

In this thesis, moral panic is therefore employed as both an affective and structural lens: it illuminates how collective fears were manufactured, amplified, and directed against marginalized groups, while also showing how those fears served the interests of emerging economic and political orders. Witch hunts become legible not as irrational eruptions of mass hysteria, but as patterned responses to crisis in which elites and communities alike found temporary resolution in the scapegoating of the vulnerable.

4.6 Feminist Sociology Lens

4.6.1 Patriarchal Structures and Gendered Violence

Silvia Federici argues that the witch hunts of early modern Europe inaugurated the violent reorganization of women´s bodies at the dawn of capitalism. In *Caliban and the Witch*, she shows how ecclesiastical and secular authorities colluded to classify female reproduction as sites of moral deviance, justifying surveillance over women´s sexuality and labour, "New forms of surveillance were also adopted to ensure that pregnant women did not terminate their pregnancies. In France, a royal edict of 1556 required women to register every pregnancy, and sentenced to death those whose infants died before baptism after a concealed delivery, whether or not proven guilty of any wrongdoing. Similar statutes were passed in England and Scotland in 1624 and 1690. A system of spies was also created to surveil unwed mothers and deprive them of any support. Even hosting an unmarried pregnant woman was made illegal, for fear that she might escape the public scrutiny" (Federici 2004: 88). By branding midwives, herbalists, and other knowledge keepers as witches, ruling elites not only criminalized women's autonomous reproductive practices but also imposed a new patriarchal order that positioned the male head of household as the sole legitimate guardian of life and labour. Federici's analysis reveals that torture, public burning, and other spectacles of punishment were not incidental byproducts of superstition, but calculated displays of power meant to discipline women's bodies into service of nascent market relations.

4.6.2 Feminist Historiography of Witch Hunts

Federici situates her account of the witch craze within a broader feminist historiography that sees these persecutions as foundational to capitalist primitive accumulation. Building on Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English's work on the professionalization of medicine, *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses A History of Women Healers*, Federici demonstrates that the systematic elimination of women healers served to dispossess communities of shared medical knowledge and to centralize control over life-giving labour. Her scholarship reframes witch hunts as a war on communing, on collective land use, shared birthing practices, and communal support systems, that had sustained peasant women for centuries. In doing so, she offers a trenchant critique of historical narratives that marginalize gender, insisting that any account of European transition to capitalism must reckon with how the subjugation of female bodies underpinned the creation of a disciplined, market-oriented workforce.

4.6.3 Political Economy of Gender Oppression

At the heart of Federici's political-economic analysis is the claim that witch hunts functioned as enforcers of primitive accumulation by severing pre-capitalist communal ties and commodifying both labour and reproduction. As common lands were enclosed and subsistence structures dismantled, women who continued to practice midwifery, herbal medicine, or subsistence gardening were branded as enemies of the emerging order. By criminalizing these forms of social reproduction, authorities compelled women, and by extension entire households, to enter wage labour markets under exploitative conditions. Federici's framework illuminates how the persecution of witches was not an irrational episode in social history but a strategic intervention in the politics of gendered labour, ensuring that women's bodies and knowledge became assets of capital rather than repositories of communal autonomy.

5. Witchcraft and Persecution in Europe

In the twenty-first century, the image of a witch is widely recognised around the globe. From the black pointed hats and broomsticks of fairy tales to the powerful, complex, and often kind spellcasters of modern fantasy, witches have remained a central figure in literature, film, folklore, and art. With countless cultural works of art portraying them, shaping the public perception: from Shakespeare's eerie Three Weird Sisters in "Macbeth," through J. K. Rowling's brave and selfless Hermione Granger in "Harry Potter," all the way to the polar duo of Glinda and Elphaba in the biggest-grossing movie of 2024, "Wicked" based on the fourth longest-playing Broadway musical of the same name.

Historically, witches were not always solely seen as creatures of fiction. Before they became subjects of books, plays, and films, they were considered very real figures. Feared, revered, and often misunderstood. In various societies across the globe, the idea of witches has taken many forms, from spiritual leaders to frowned-upon outcasts. But how did this transformation occur? Where did the idea of the witch originate and how did it evolve throughout European history?

5.1 Witchcraft in Antiquity

Witchcraft in antiquity was a complex phenomenon, deeply intersecting with the religious, cultural, and social spheres of different ancient civilizations. From Egypt to Mesopotamia, from ancient Greece to ancient Rome, the perception of magic varied significantly, which reflects the diverse beliefs and core values of the specific societies. By understanding the role of witchcraft in antiquity, we can gain insight into the human desire to control the unknown through religious beliefs and the supernatural and how this aspiration shaped the beliefs and practices of new religions and societies in later Europe.

While ancient Egyptians believed in magic, they did not believe in witches as we understand the term today. In their culture and beliefs, everyone was, to some extent, able to contact otherworldly deities, therefore being part of a supernatural world was not seen as something suspicious or negative. As R. E. Hutton explains in *The Witch: A History of Fear, from Ancient Times to the Present*, there was no clear border between the human, material world and the supernatural sphere: "This was part of a world picture in which the boundary between human and divine was porous, so that goddesses and gods often needed the aid of human beings and the greatest of the latter could become deified when they died and sometimes even before then." (Hutton 2017: 45). Joshua J. Mark wrote in his article *Magic in Ancient Egypt* that in a society where the different dimensions interfere so greatly and where everyone could be chosen to serve the deities, good or evil, there was no marginalized group in the community chosen as scapegoats believed only to follow the malevolent forces and bring disorder and suffering to the people. Magic known as "heka" was not just a mystical practice, but a fundamental power believed to sustain the universe. This force was influential to the daily life of Egyptians, starting from religion and medicine and ending on mundane everyday tasks.

The peoples of ancient Mesopotamia, however, had far more respect and fear of their godly and spiritual figures. They did not believe that the average human could possess the power to contact supernatural beings directly. Nevertheless, the notion of magic was closely intertwined with the formal religion of the societies. One of their most important tasks was to expel demons and evil forces that were believed to be a "permanent menace" (Hutton 2017: 48) to Mesopotamian societies. While demons were unearthly spirits, there was another group believed to have brought harm to the societies of Sumeria, Babylonia, and Assyria- witches. According to Hutton, witches were people "in the classic sense of human beings, concealed inside their own society, who worked magic to harm others because they were inherently evil and associated with the demons which were the object of so much fear." (Hutton 2017: 49) As Tzvi Abusch writes in his book *Mesopotamian Witchcraft* (in Mesopotamian beliefs, witchcraft and witches were perceived as powerful forces, capable of causing significant misfortune and harm. Witchcraft was initially seen as an external power, with texts focusing on the actions of witches against their victims rather than the persons themselves (Tzvi 2002: 89). Over time, witchcraft became a serious concern for exorcists and priest figures, called ašipu, due to the centralization and structurization of state, temple, and economy (Tzvi 2002: 28). This integration led to changes in the approach to witchcraft, such as sending the witch to the netherworld instead of burning her in effigy (Tzvi 2002: 93). The integration of witchcraft into exorcism literature led to the creation of new ideas, such as one that witches could even provoke the personal god to anger (Tzvi 2002: 46). This development reflects a shift in Mesopotamian religious thought, where witchcraft began to overshadow the personal god as a cause of misfortune (Tzvi 2002: 47). The emerging centrality of illness in texts exploring witchcraft reflect the fact that witchcraft was increasingly held responsible for more and more adversities (Tzvi 2022: 93). In some texts, witches were described as performing destructive magic, often depicted as women who harm others through indirect means like stealing objects or making figurines (Tzvi 2002: 6-7). In Mesopotamia, the society was under a patriarchal rule, with women being below men on the social ladder. In *Women in Mesopotamia* (1995) by M. Stol we can read about how young girls would marry older men of their fathers' choice, not being equal to their husbands and not having equal rights in marriage, "In this patriarchal society girls of a few feet high could already be assigned to a future husband. (…) The future wife is the passive object of this transaction. The woman acquires the status 'wife' already at the moment of paying the brideprice. (…) (c) A man has the right to take a concubine; (d) A man can degradate his wife and promote his concubine" (Stol 1995: 125). Furthermore, the author describes how a man can wed another woman, should the first wife not give him any children, as children would traditionally take care of their old parents. The woman would become a second wife of the man and a slave of the first woman. Punishments were also unfairly given to men and women, as the price to be paid for adultery by the former was “six minas of silver” and death by an iron dagger by the latter (Stol 1995: 130). R. E. Hutton specifies that “the stereotypical witch mentioned in the sources is assumed to be female, which seems to match the generally low status of women in Mesopotamian society and make witchcraft an assumed weapon of the weak and marginalized.” (Stol 1995: 49-50), which proves to be a current in most societies that believe(d) in witches altogether.

According to Hutton, ancient Greek society is “the oldest European society from which evidence exists for attitudes to magic, including witchcraft” (Hutton 2017: 44-73). Robert L. Fowler explains in his article Greek Magic, Greek Religion that magic, defined as the use of charms, spells, and other ways to connect a human to the supernatural, was part of daily life in ancient Greece (Fowler 1995: 1-2). Magical activities were not confined to the margins of the society but was an integral part of the mainstream religious practices. The distinction between magic and religion according to Fowler lies more in social context and approval (Fowler 1995: 2). Examples of common magical practices were binding spells, love potions, the use of amulets that were supposed to help people achieve goals such as securing love or happiness, harming rivals or enhancing one´s fertility (Fowler 1995: 2-4). Many public religious ceremonies and celebrations in ancient Greece included what would be regarded as magical elements, for example Eleusinian Mysteries´ rain-making rituals or the Thesmophoria’s fertility magic (Fowler 1995: 6-7). As aforementioned, a lot depended on the social context when it comes to magic. The boundaries between magic and religion were rather fluid and the same practices could either be viewed as magical or religious. Public rituals like scapegoat ceremonies and sacred marriages had clear magical purposes, but they were socially sanctioned and integrated into the religious framework (Fowler 1995: 7-8). Hutton states that the difference between magic and religion distinguished by the ancient Greeks was unlike what modern societies thought of both. “Theirs was one between magic and normative religious practice, rather than between magic and religion as such.” (Hutton 2017: 44-73). Hutton further notes that it wasn´t until around the fifth century BC that the Greek society started to treat magic with estrangement. Nevertheless, there was no person who could be described as a witch. There were service magicians, “offering morally and religiously dubious services”, but there exists no record of someone using malevolent magic in ancient Greek history (Hutton 2017: 44-73).

In ancient Rome, the concept of witchcraft was, similarly to other ancient societies, was deeply connected to societal and religious beliefs of the people. According to Thammaryne R. Loenert, what could be seen as witchcraft in Rome was practiced both by amateurs and professionals, who used magical objects such as voodoo dolls, curse tablets and others to perform magic. (Loenert 2023: 11) The traditional religious rites were seen as communal and selfless in nature, which contrasted with the self-serving and often even considered manipulative essence of the magical practices (Loenert 2023: 24). What was crucial in a shift of the perception of magic was the rise of Christianity. Miracles performed by holy men were treated much differently than the magic performed by others, which started to increasingly become associated with demonic influence (Loenert 2023: 27). Over time, Roman laws against magic evolved, initially addressing the harm of spells and potion-making (and poisoning), later expanding to include much broader prohibitions under the influence of the ever-growing Christian doctrine (Loenert 2023: 31). Literary depictions of witches, such as Canidia in Horace´s works or Erichtho in Lucan´s Pharsalia, reflect societal fears and the complex relationship between power, gender, and magic (Loenert 2023: 55). Similarly to the later depictions of witches, the Roman portrayal was that of a dangerous and malevolent nature of them, reinforcing the negative connotations associated with witchcraft (Loenert 2023: 67). As reported by Hutton, Romans were the first European civilization to "make accusations of it [witchcraft] as a political weapon" (Hutton 2017: 44-73). Two of the Roman emperors, Augustus and Tiberius, have fought unofficial magicians, such as those predicting the future or astrologers, as parts of their political agendas "to establish its authority and the stability of the state" (Hutton 2017: 44-73) One of the most notable documentations of witchcraft accusations is when Livia Julia, Tiberius´ daughter-in-law accused a "saga", which was a name for female magicians, of doing harm to one of her servants who had disappeared. Livia Julia was so deeply moved by this, that she appealed to all mothers and warned them against evil forces and malevolent spells (Hutton 2017: 44-73).

Across ancient civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome, beliefs about witchcraft and witches shared remarkable similarities, which reveal fascinating history of cultural, religious, and societal dynamics. Magic was a universal concept, deeply rooted in the cultures of various societies, however the interpretations of it as well as the societal acceptance varied. In Egypt, it was believed that all individuals possessed some connection to the supernatural, emphasizing a collective potential for magic. Similarly, ancient Mesopotamia, being one of the richest and diverse society in culture and beliefs, viewed magic as a complex force that could have both positive and negative consequence and influence. These perspectives highlight the versatile nature of magic, which was often intersecting with traditional religious rituals, societal norms, as well as artistic and philosophical currents. In ancient Greece, magic was closely intertwined with mainstream religious practices, with boundaries between the two defined by social context. In ancient Rome, magic was similarly close to societal and religious frameworks. Nonetheless, the rise of Christianity introduced a significant shift. Miracles performed by official holy men were increasingly celebrated, while other magical practices became demonized and associated with evil. This transition was reflected in evolving Roman laws and literary portrayal of witches, which only reinforced the perception of witchcraft as dangerous and suspicious.

What is a common theme for all these civilizations, beyond their views on magic, is their patriarchal structure. Women typically held a subordinate status to men, and within that social framework, witches were predominantly cast as female, a stereotype shaped by cultural fears and biases regarding women. This association between gender and magic, coupled with evolving religious attitudes, influenced the negative connotations of witchcraft that have persisted through the centuries. Ultimately, the ancient world offers a complex lens through which to understand how the narratives about witchcraft were shaped, leaving a mark on history and modern superstition.

5.2 Medieval and Early Modern Perceptions of Witchcraft in Europe

In medieval and early modern Europe, the idea of witchcraft was influenced by a complex interaction between popular beliefs, legal frameworks, and religious dogma. The later Middle Ages witnessed a growing inclination to link witchcraft to heresy and satanic influence, whereas early medieval attitudes regarding magic were frequently ambiguous. It was seen as a blend of folk traditions, learned practices, and Christian demonology. One of the most notable works on this topic is *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, where the author, Jeffrey Burton Russel explains how during the Middle Ages, witchcraft was deeply connected to folklore, religious beliefs, and social anxieties, evolving into a phenomenon uniquely shaped by Christian society. Early conceptions of witchcraft often drew from pagan traditions, as seen in the association with figures like Diana and nocturnal rituals (Russel 2019: 23). These practices, initially tied to agricultural and hunting traditions, were later transformed by Christianity into heretical acts linked to demonic influence (Russel 2019: 24). The rise of Reformist heresies and movements such as Catharism in the 12th century further contributed to the development of witchcraft narratives, emphasizing Satan's role in opposition to the Church (Russel 2019: 25). By the 14th century, witchcraft had become a form of social protest, shaped by economic, political, and religious turmoil, including famine, plague, and crusades (Russel 2019; 26). The Inquisition played a critical role in formalizing accusations, enforcing scholastic definitions, and using torture to extract confessions, which often included claims of nocturnal meetings, demonic pacts, and ritual desecration (Russel 2019: 25–26). These elements culminated in the classical depiction of witchcraft by the late 15th century, defined by its combination of folklore, sorcery, heresy, and Christian demonology, establishing a framework for understanding witches as agents of chaos and rebellion against societal norms (Russel 2019: 23).

According to Karen Jolly, Edward Peters, and Catharina Raudvere, this change was brought about by changing legislative frameworks that aimed to control supernatural practices as well as Church concerns. By the late medieval period, witches were seen as collaborators in a demonic pact with Satan rather than as practitioners of illegal, but previously frequently accepted, types of magic. This image was cemented by inquisitorial procedures and works like Malleus Maleficarum. This connection was further solidified by the early modern witch trials, where regional differences in prosecution showed how local folklore, gendered anxieties and theological discourse intersected.

According to Jolly, Peters, and Raudvere in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe, Volume 3: The Middle Ages*, the Celtic, Scandinavian, Germanic, and Slavic cultures of Europe, as well as surviving Graeco-Roman practices, are frequently the sources of popular medieval European customs. Examples are folk knowledge of medicinal cures, special plants or holy sites, amulets, charms, and curses. During the Middle Ages, native European languages lacked a phrase that could be used to refer to all these different behaviours under a single heading of excluded practices. Instead, classical "magia" was entangled with heresy and paganism as broad categories of exclusion. Magic occupied an ambiguous space in the early Middle Ages. Sometimes it was condemned as superstition but could also be tolerated or even practiced by religious figures for healing or protection (Jolly, Peters, and Raudvere 2002: 13-15). However, as the Church expanded its influence and sought to enforce stricter religious orthodoxy, the distinction between folk magic and heresy became increasingly blurred. By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, clerical authorities began associating magic with demonic influence, a shift that laid groundwork for later fears of witches as heretical conspirators (Jolly, Peters, and Raudvere 2002: 21-22).

Naturally, the pace with which witchcraft and witch suspicion was increasing in Europe was different among diverse European countries. As Charles Mackay writes in his book *The Witch Mania*, in France, during Charlemagne´s reign, sorcery, necromancy, and witchcraft gained prominence as crimes. He attempted to combat their practices through multiple orders to expel practitioners, eventually introducing strict measures. He issued a series of edicts detailed in the *Capitulaire de Baluse*, which outlawed all forms of magic and witchcraft, decreeing the death penalty for anyone engaging in magical activities such as crafting potions, harming crops and livestock, manipulating the weather, or inflicting diseases. Even those consulting such practitioners faced potential punishment, which in extreme cases could even mean execution. These actions were intended to eradicate witches and their practices from society. Following this period, witchcraft convictions are frequently brought up, particularly by French historians. It was a crime that was so easily attributed to a person, and so hard to disprove that the powerful simply needed to accuse their political opponents of weaker social position of witchcraft in order to destroy them whenever they felt like it and had no other way to do it (Mackay 2018: 7-8).

The persecution of the Templars in 1307 serves as a striking example of how accusation of witchcraft and diabolism was used as a powerful tool. The Templars, whose immense wealth and influence had earned them strong dislike among the ruling elite, were subjected to a campaign of defamation orchestrated by King Philip IV of France. The king, likely motivated by the vision of material gain and a chance to neutralize their power, fabricated charges accusing the Templars of heretical practices, including devil worship and participation in the witches´ Sabbaths. These accusations proved to be highly effective. King Philip IV issued mass arrests across his authority, and under extreme torture, many Templars confessed to false and unreal crimes, which only reinforced public condemnation and hatred. The pope, influenced by the French king´s religiousness and devotion to the Church, extended the campaign against the Templars further across Europe, leading to their imprisonment, execution, and finally the confiscation of their wealth (Mackay 2018: 9-10).

In the Duchy of Bremen in Germany the Stedinger, a community of Frieslanders, faced years of oppression organized by powerful authorities. The Archbishop of Bremen, the Count of Oldenburg, and other regional leaders formed a coalition against the Stedinger, ultimately overwhelming them. Despite their poor state, the Stedinger demonstrated resilience and bravery, effectively resisting the first military efforts against them. Unable to conquer them through warfare, the archbishop turned to Pope Gregory IX for spiritual reinforcement. In response, the pope endorsed a crusade against the Stedinger, assembling bishops and clergy throughout the region to eliminate what he characterized as malevolent witches and wizards. Emperor Frederick II also issued declarations banning such practices, aligning with the Church´s and the pope´s directives. The crusade culminated in the massacre of around eight thousand Stedinger, effectively destroying and destroying their community. The victors devastated the whole region, killing women, children, and the elderly, confiscating livestock, setting fire to homes and forests, leaving widespread destruction. This episode reflects the extent to which accusations of witchcraft were employed as a political and religious tool to justify extreme violence and consolidate power (Mackay 2018: 8-9).

In 1488, Pope Innocent VIII issued a significant papal bull that marked a turning point in the Church´s stance on witchcraft, reflecting the era´s mounting fears of magic and the potential diabolical influence. Alarmed by widespread reports of magic and witchcraft, the pope framed these practices as a threat to Christendom, accusing people of invoking malevolent magic to harm humanity and nature. His proclamation detailed the evil actions of witches, from devastating crops and livestock to destroying marriages and causing infertility in women. To combat this enemy, the pope authorized inquisitors across Europe to seek out, convict, and punish practitioners of witchcraft with the full weight of apostolic authority. This directive began the rise of professional witch-hunters, who made it their mission to uncover and eventually execute suspected witches. Among them, Heinrich Kramer, Henry Institor, a skilled jurisconsult, and the Bishop of Strasbourg, were appointed to lead witch trials in Germany. Key centres of their operations included Bamberg, Trier, Cologne, Paderborn, and Würzburg, where their actions led to the execution of over three thousand individuals during their lifetimes alone. The estimate is considered quite conservative given the lack of precise records. As accusations of witchcraft surged, new commissioners were continually appointed to extend the campaigns into Germany, France, and Switzerland, with Spain and Portugal leaving the matter in the hands of the Inquisition. These efforts rooted a system of widespread persecution. The campaign not only institutionalized the witch hunts but also reinforced a narrative of great fear and suspicion that would dominate European societies (Mackay 2009: 12, 37) The growing concern culminated in the late medieval period when treatises like the *Malleus Maleficarum* portrayed witches as serious dangerous enemies of Christian society (Mackay 2009: 24).

These evolving perceptions weren´t just about fears of the supernatural. They also reflected deeper societal anxieties about power, gender, and religious purity. Women, especially healers and midwives were disproportionately accused, as their traditional knowledge, passed through generations, was increasingly seen as suspicious (Jolly, Peters, and Raudvere 2002: 19-20). Henri Boguet, infamously known as "The Grand Judge of Witches for the Territory of St. Claude," devised a set of seventy articles to systematize witch trials, embodying incomparable cruelty. His code asserted that mere suspicion of witchcraft sufficed to arrest and torture individuals, with absurd indicators such as muttering, avoiding eye contact, or failing to cry viewed as incontrovertible proof of guilt. Even the testimony of children against their parents or individuals of disreputable character, who would otherwise be considered unreliable in legal disputes, was accepted as credible evidence if witchcraft accusations were involved. Such oppressive doctrines, endorsed by ecclesiastical and civil authorities alike, fuelled relentless persecution across Europe. Cities such as Cologne reportedly burned three hundred witches annually, while Bamberg, Nuremberg, Geneva, Paris, Toulouse, and Lyons witnessed staggering numbers of executions, with hundreds perishing in each location (Raudvere 2002: 37).

5.2.2 The Role of the Malleus Maleficarum (1487)

When it comes to the topic of the history of witches in Europe, one of, if not the most influential works ever created is the *Malleus Maleficarum*, translated as *Hammer of Witches*, written in 1486 by Heinrich Kramer and Jakob Sprenger. The text was not only a collection of superstitions and suspicions but was mostly a text grounded in theological and legal principles that was set out to establish a systematic approach to identifying, prosecuting, and eliminating supposed witches. The authors argued that witchcraft was inherently linked to heresy and diabolism, framing it as a direct threat to the moral and spiritual fabric of the Christian societies of Europe. By appealing to religious doctrine and blending it with local folklore, the book served as a very powerful tool in legitimizing the fear of witchcraft. Its impact was increased through the pope´s endorsement. Over time, the *Malleus Maleficarum* became a foundation for inquisitorial practices across the continent, followed by countless witch trials guided by the book (Ankarloo).

In his 2009 book titled *The Hammer of Witches: A Complete Translation of the Malleus Maleficarum*, Christopher S. Mackay writes, in the first part of the book where he presents more insight into the history and circumstances around the book as well as the author´s personal opinions, that the great persecutions of magic that lasted from the fifteenth until the early seventeenth centuries were based on an intensified notion of witchcraft, often termed "satanism" or "diabolism." This perspective depicted witches as members of an organized, malevolent society personally led by Satan himself, which is strictly dedicated to harming others through magic (maleficia). Unlike earlier conceptions of folk magic, which included healing, helping, and divination, this new framework cast witches solely as part of an evil, conspiratorial network created to undermine and battle the Christian society. As Mackay notes, this concept is known as the “elaborated concept of witchcraft,” characterized by six central beliefs: “(1) A pact entered into with the Devil (and concomitant apostasy from Christianity), (2) Sexual relations with the Devil, (3) Aerial flight for the purpose of attending: (4) An assembly presided over by Satan himself (at which initiates entered into the pact, and incest and promiscuous sex were engaged in by the attendees), (5) The practice of maleficent magic,

(6) The slaughter of babies" (Mackay 2009: 19). These ideas first appeared in four Latin and German texts from the 1430s, though there are indications that aspects of this framework were taking shape as early as the late fourteenth century. The emphasis on demonic pacts and secret satanic assemblies significantly expanded the perceived threat of witches and justified extreme measures that tried to combat them (Mackay 2009: 20).

The increased fear of witchcraft was further fuelled by the legal and ecclesiastical structures responsible for investigating heresy. The Inquisition, a tribunal tasked with maintaining religious orthodoxy, played a major role in prosecuting alleged witches. Heinrich Kramer and Jakob Sprenger, the authors of the Malleus Maleficarum, were both inquisitors and significantly influenced the legal and theological framework for witch trials. Mackay describes the power inquisitors held over accused witches as follows: "The inquisitor was empowered to conduct a full investigation on his own and to seek the assistance of the secular authorities ('secular arm') for this purpose. Though the inquisitors had full authority to deal with an accusation as they saw fit and could keep someone imprisoned for years if they suspected that a person who refused to confess was guilty, they were also entitled to make use of questioning under torture. This practice was a standard procedure in contemporary legal procedure." (Mackay 2009: 27-28) The use of torture as a means of extracting confessions became a defining feature of witch trials. Inquisitors could detain suspects indefinitely and compel them to confess under extreme physical threat. These coerced confessions often reinforced the prevailing notions of witchcraft, as accused individuals, desperate to end their suffering, would confirm the existence of satanic pacts, night flights, and baby-killing-ritual claims that would then be used to prosecute others.

According to Charles Mackay, Kramer established a formalized process for witch trials, prescribing methods by which inquisitors could identify alleged witches. These examinations, frequently conducted under torture, involved grotesque and often absurd questions designed to elicit confessions. Suspects were interrogated about their midnight meeting with the devil, their attendance at the witches´ Sabbath and their possession of familiar spirits. Additional accusations included their supposed ability to manipulate natural forces, such as summoning whirlwinds or calling down lightnings, and claims of engaging in sexual relations with Satan. These procedures set the framework for widespread persecution and reflected deeply ingrained fears and prejudices of the Christian Church (Mackay 2009: 12). The inquisitors wasted no time in carrying out their brutal campaigns. In Italy, Cumarius was responsible for the execution of forty-one women in a single province, while in Germany, Sprenger's fanaticism allegedly resulted in the deaths of over five hundred individuals within the years 1515 and

1516. The striking similarity in the confessions of the accused was taken as irrefutable evidence of guilt, though this consistency is unsurprising given that the interrogations followed the rigid script of the Malleus Maleficarum. These confessions, extracted under the excruciating pain of torture, reflected not truth but the answers demanded by their tormentors. Some victims, overwhelmed by fear and agony, went so far as to invent grotesque admissions, such as bearing children fathered by the devil, hoping this would hasten their death and spare them further suffering. Notably, only childless women made such claims, as mothers, even in their extreme despair, refrained from such fabrications. Those who confessed to these horrors were swiftly executed, their lives deemed unworthy of continuation in a society gripped by fear and fanaticism (Mackay 2009: 13).

5.2.3 Malleus Maleficarum and Gendered Foundations of Witch Persecution

One of the most insidious aspects of the *Malleus Maleficarum* was its role in deepening gender biases and driving the disproportionate persecution of women during the witch hunts. The text elaborated on the perceived moral, intellectual, and physical weaknesses of women, suggesting that they were inherently more impressionable to the influence of the devil. Kramer and Sprenger perpetuated harmful stereotypes that painted women as deceitful, insidious, and prone to acts of malice, thereby reinforcing societal fears. This framing had devastating consequences, as it led to the marginalization and demonization of countless women, many of whom were accused based on as little as gossip, envy, or local disputes. The gendered framework of the *Malleus Maleficarum* did more than just fuel witch trials. It established a cultural narrative that dehumanized women and undermined their agency. The *Malleus* played a central role in shaping the misogynistic framework that underpinned early modern witch hunts. More than a manual, the Malleus was a weaponized articulation of deep-seated anxieties about female agency, sexuality, and power. By portraying accusations of witchcraft as an ethical pursuit, the treatise justified and maintained cycles of violence, with devastating effects on communities throughout Europe.

At the core of the Malleus lies a deeply gendered worldview. Women, according to Kramer and Sprenger, were not just more likely to become witches. They were, in effect, naturally inclined to it. The authors repeatedly cite the supposed intellectual, moral, and spiritual inferiority of women as justification for their vulnerability to the devil's seduction. One of the most infamous passages declares: "All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable" (Mackay 2009: 114). This claim encapsulates the dual association of women with sin and sexuality, suggesting that their physical desires were both uncontrollable and inherently dangerous. In the patriarchal society of late medieval Europe, such assertions served to vilify female sexuality and independence.

Furthermore, the Malleus utilizes Christian doctrine and distorted interpretations of scripture to support its misogynistic claims. Drawing on the Genesis narrative, the authors argue that just as Eve was the first to succumb to Satan's temptation, all women possess an inherited weakness and impressionability to evil. The text presumes that women's deceitful and manipulative nature makes them ideal agents of the devil, especially in their capacity to harm men through enchantment, infertility, impotence, or the destruction of domestic life. It warns that women, especially midwives and older widows, are more likely to engage in maleficium, harmful magic, and therefore should be watched with suspicion (Levack 2016: 144). These ideas directly influenced the disproportionate targeting of women during witch trials, where it is estimated that the majority of the accused were female. Although depending on the source different ratios and numbers can be found, it is unanimous that men were not the main target of the hunts and prosecutions. Fred Lewsey writes in his article that "While both men and women have historically been accused of the malicious use of magic, only around 10–30% of suspected witches were men by the 16th and 17th centuries in mainland Europe, the British Isles and New England in the US." Another author that has studied the history of witch hunts, Brydie Kosmina, states in her book *Witches and the Past* that "Estimates about the gender breakdown of the victims of the witch trials vary according to region and period of time but generally sit between 70 and 80% of the victims being women" (Levack 2016: 38).

The Malleus also deliberately combines female social roles with magical danger. Midwives, for example, were singled out for their intimate knowledge of the female body and their presence at the most notable moments of life and death: childbirth, miscarriage, infant mortality. The authors suggest that such women were not only capable of, but often responsible for, murdering infants and offering them to the devil for sacrifice as part of satanic rituals. This perverse framing of care work as satanic reflects broader male anxieties about female autonomy in spaces beyond male control (Barstow 1995). The Malleus turned these everyday women into scapegoats for social, religious, and medical phenomena that were poorly understood, such as disease, infertility, or sudden death.

The book's influence endured well beyond its initial publication. Though the Catholic Church never officially endorsed it, the Malleus was widely read and reprinted throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, becoming a standard reference for magistrates and inquisitors. Its authority was reinforced not by ecclesiastical canon, but by its compatibility with rising social fears and institutional misogyny. In practice, it helped formalize and systematize gendered witch persecution, giving persecutors a theological and legal justification for targeting women under the guise of piety and public safety (Roper 2006: 25).

5.2.4 Joan of Arc: Martyr or Witch?

Joan of Arc´s extraordinary life and tragic death have long been subjects of various studies and fascination. A particular subject of interest is her trial, which was based on accusations of heresy and witchcraft. Her spiritual experiences and claims of divine guidance became central points during her interrogation. By emphasising her tangible and intimate interactions with her "voices," Joan´s accusers perceived them as manifestations of witchcraft. Her trial portrays how her defiance of societal norms and unbreakable faith led to her death, reflecting the era´s interplay of religion, superstition and political motives.

As portrayed by Marina Warner in *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism*, Joan of Arc´s prosecution and execution were deeply connected to the era´s fear of supernatural influence, which often associated her extraordinary visions and voices she claimed to have heard with witchcraft and heresy. During the trial, her accusers were obsessively focused on the nature of her "voices." She claimed that they were the divine counsel from the Saints: Saint Michael, Saint Catherine, and Saint Margaret. These voices were central to her mission to lead the French forces against English domination, yet their physical and sensory manifestations became a key point of interrogation by her enemies, who sought to discredit her as a servant of the devil rather than a divinely inspired leader. The trial records show how during the interrogations, the questioners repeatedly manipulated her descriptions, asking probing and insinuating questions about whether the saints she claimed to be in contact with had material forms, wore clothes, or could be touched, all while drawing parallels to the sensual experiences normally associated with witchcraft at that time (Warner 2013: 104-108). Accusations of idolatry and diabolical pacts were weaponized against the heroic leader, highlighting the Church´s deep-seated mistrust regarding unorthodox spiritual experiences. Her insistence on the physicality of her visions, claiming she saw the saints "with her bodily eyes as clearly as she saw her judges," was defined by the inquisitors as evidence of demonic influence rather than divine grace (Warner 2013: 111). The judges aligned her tangible experiences with traditional lore surrounding witches, such as interactions with Satan and physical sensations during supernatural encounters. By framing her relationship with her "voices" within the context of idolatry and witchcraft, she was portrayed as a dangerous sorceress in defiance of Church authority (Warner 2013: 113-114).

The trial´s focus on Joan´s sensory and mystical experiences reveals the boundary between sanctity and witchcraft in medieval Christian thought. The interrogation strategies paralleled those typically used in witch trials happening at a similar time, where suspects were questioned about their intimacy with supernatural entities. Joan´s responses, affirming the comfort and guidance of her saints while evading questions about their physical traits, reflected her innocence and steadfast faith. Unfortunately, this ultimately served to entrap her within the theological and cultural framework of witchcraft accusations (Warner 2013: 115-116). Her death as a "relapsed heretic" in 1431, sentenced to be burned at the stake, cemented her image as a figure who straddled the line between revered martyr and condemned witch.

Joan of Arc's death by burning is not solely connected to the "satanic" voices that she was being accused of having a witch-like relationship with. According to Feinberg, "when she was 19 years old, Joan of Arc was burned at the stake by the Inquisition of the Catholic church because she refused to stop dressing as a man." (Feinberg 1992: 12) In her study of Joan of Arc Leslie Feinberg shows that the celebrated heroine's execution in 1431 was driven less by accusations of diabolism than by her refusal to abandon male attire. At nineteen, Joan was placed on trial by the Inquisition not for practicing sorcery but for insisting that divinely inspired missions justified her choice to dress as a man. Church theologians at the University of Paris condemned her cross-dressing as "following the custom of the Gentiles and the Heathen," a violation of divine and secular law that, they decreed, warranted the stake (Feinberg 1992: 13). Subjected to psychological torture and threats of public burning, Joan recanted under duress and agreed to wear women's clothing. Within days she resumed her martial habit, declaring that no earthly power could force her to renounce the dress she regarded as central to her identity and divine calling. This act of defiance prompted her immediate condemnation as a relapsed heretic and her death by fire. Feinberg uses Joan's story to illustrate how institutions of power have long enforced rigid gender norms as a means of social control, punishing those whose very existence challenged the boundaries of acceptable identity.

Joan's fate cannot be separated from the wider political and social upheaval of her time. The Hundred Years War had shattered feudal hierarchies and driven France into chronic crisis. As a peasant woman who claimed divine sanction to lead armies, Joan embodied a direct challenge to both the landowning nobility and the male-dominated clerical hierarchy. When she refused ransom after her capture, the nobles' decision to hand her over to the Inquisition underscored their fear of her popular appeal and her capacity to rally commoners against entrenched power. By codifying her cross-dressing as a capital offense, "a thing contrary to divine law and abominable before God," the University of Paris theologians and the Inquisition transformed a question of personal identity into an existential threat to the social order (Feinberg 1992: 13). In this way, Joan's "transvestism" became a convenient legal and moral lever, one that justified her execution at precisely the moment when her leadership had begun to undermine both feudal and ecclesiastical monopolies on authority.

Feinberg shows that Joan's later canonization in 1920 served a similarly political purpose and again erased the truth of her gender expression. As revolutionary movements swept the globe, the Catholic Church sought a hero who could inspire unity and bolster its waning influence among working people. By celebrating "Saint Joan" without acknowledging that she died for refusing to wear women's clothing, the Church reburied her transvestite identity in a sanitized hagiography. Feinberg argues that this erasure is more than historical oversight; it mirrors a broader pattern of denying transgender contributions to social struggle (Feinberg 1992: 14). Rediscovering Joan as a transgender martyr therefore becomes an act of resistance against institutional attempts to rewrite or obscure the past. Her story resonates today as we confront new moral panics over gender nonconformity, reminding us that enforcing rigid clothing norms and policing bodies have long served to uphold hierarchies of power and to suppress transformative justice.

Seen through the lens of feminist sociology, these changing perceptions of witchcraft reflected more than shifting beliefs about the supernatural. They signalled the institutionalization of patriarchal control over women's bodies and knowledge, preparing the ground for the later criminalization of midwives, healers, and independent women. Intersectionality helps us recognize that not all women were equally vulnerable: those who were poor, widowed, or otherwise socially marginal faced far greater risks of persecution

5.3 Legal Frameworks: Canonical and Secular Laws on Witchcraft

5.3.1 Canonical Laws on Witchcraft

Before the witch craze grasped Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries, the legal stance of the Catholic Church on witchcraft was complex and often contradictory. Canonical laws, which derived from ecclesiastical authority and doctrine, played a fundamental role in defining how witchcraft was perceived and prosecuted. While early Church doctrine often treated belief in magic as a superstition or a symptom of weak faith, by the late medieval period, canonical law had evolved to view witchcraft as a form of heresy, aligning it with broader campaigns against religious deviance. This transformation helped construct a legal-theological foundation for the later mass persecutions, even if the Church itself did not always support the excesses of secular trials.

Initially, the Church took a surprisingly sceptical stance toward witchcraft. The most influential early text, the *Canon Episcopi*, compiled in the 10th century and later included in *Gratian's Decretum* (1140), dismissed popular beliefs in night-flying witches and magical transformations as foolish and heretical. The Canon states that women who believe they ride with Diana or Herodias at night are "seduced by the devil" and that anyone who believes such illusions is "an unbeliever" (Kors 2001: 43). This early position was not only sceptical of magic but critical of belief in its power, viewing such belief as a failure of Christian faith. As such, the Church in this period aimed to root out superstition, not witchcraft per se. *Canon Episcopi* further reveals significant social and gender tension of the late Carolingian period (that lasted from 800 to 887). Regino described "wicked women" who claimed to ride at night on the backs of beasts, led by the goddess Diana. This was supposed to depict a direct inversion of the masculine hierarchy of Carolingian society (Halsted 2019: 362). He emphasized their actions as a distortion of proper societal norms, highlighting how absurd it would be of women to ride as if they were warriors or hunters, which were roles that had been traditionally reserved for elite men (Halsted 2019: 373–374). Regino's language positioned these women within the realm of some kind of magic practitioners, despite his assertion that their experiences were only illusions created by Satan (Halsted 2019: 371). The "Canon" portrayed these women as a chaotic crowd, or "turba," which was set to undermine the idealized male bonds of loyalty and camaraderie that upheld Carolingian political stability (Halsted 2019: 375). Through his descriptions, Regino expressed broader societal fears of ambitious women, which he linked to political instability and even the decline of the Carolingian empire (Halsted 2019: 378–380).

However, beginning in the 13th century, theological and legal perspectives began to shift. Influenced by the rise of scholasticism and more systematic theology, figures like Thomas Aquinas, one of the most notable philosophers and theologists in medieval Europe, argued that demons could interfere in the material world with God´s permission and that humans could enter pacts with them (Bailey 2007: 88). This gave intellectual legitimacy to the idea that magic, if assisted by demons, could be real and harmful. The Church began to blur the line between superstition and heresy- if witches truly could consort with demons, then witchcraft became not just a delusion but an act of spiritual rebellion, an intentional turning away from God.

The institutional Church's growing concern about heresy itself also contributed to this evolution. The establishment of the Medieval Inquisition in the 1230s marked a shift toward identifying and eradicating various forms of heresy and blasphemy, from Catharism to Waldensianism. Witchcraft, particularly when associated with apostasy, devil worship, or secret gatherings, increasingly fell under the inquisitors' domain. Theologians such as Bernard Gui and later Nicolas Eymerich, in his *Directorium Inquisitorum* (1376), began to address magic and demonology within the same frameworks used to prosecute said cases of heresy (Monter 1976: 22). Although not yet the full-blown Satanic witchcraft of the 16th century, these legal texts and manuals laid the groundwork for future developments.

The Church's stance hardened further in the 15th century. A true milestone moment came in 1484, when Pope Innocent VIII issued the papal bull Summis desiderantes affectibus, which authorized inquisitors Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger to prosecute witchcraft in Germany with ecclesiastical backing. While the bull primarily responded to local conflicts over jurisdiction, its broader effect was to give the impression that the pope had officially recognized witchcraft as an urgent spiritual and social threat. Kramer would later cite this bull as papal endorsement of his infamous Malleus Maleficarum (1487), a text which, though never formally sanctioned by the Church, heavily influenced witch trials across Europe (Levack 2016: 189).

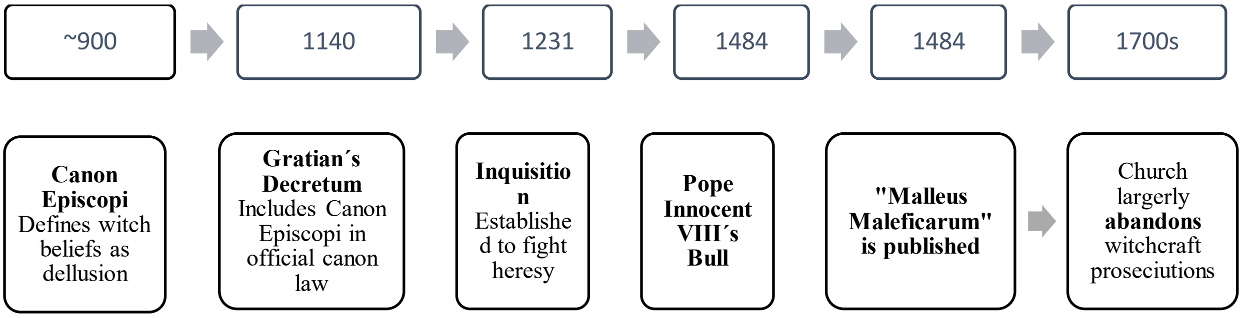
Despite these developments, canonical law did not always support the extremes of witch persecution seen in secular courts. Church law traditionally required confession or strong evidence, and it imposed stricter limits on the use of torture than civil codes, which were often more sympathetic at that time. In the early modern period, some ecclesiastical courts, especially in Italy and Spain under the Roman and Spanish Inquisitions, demonstrated scepticism toward witch accusations. In fact, the Spanish Inquisition was known for its restraint, sometimes dismissing cases due to lack of evidence and emphasizing religious education over punishment (Perry 2006: 52). This cautious approach contrasts with the more brutal witch hunts in Central Europe, mainly German and Swiss territories, where fragmented legal systems and localized panic allowed civil authorities to act with far greater severity.

By the late 16th and early 17th centuries, some Church authorities and theologians began openly questioning the legal and theological basis for witch hunts. Critics such as Johann Weyer, a physician and student of Agrippa, published *De Praestigiis Daemonum* (1563), arguing that most accused witches were mentally ill and that belief in witchcraft was itself irrational and un-Christian (Weyer 1563: 154). Though Weyer was condemned by some contemporaries, his arguments resonated with later thinkers and influenced a growing body of ecclesiastical and legal officials who sought to rein in the hysteria. In Italy, the Congregation of the Holy Office increasingly advised against harsh punishments and discouraged reliance on unprovable accusations (Bailey 2007: 202).

Thus, while canonical law helped establish the intellectual and procedural foundations of witch persecution, it also contained mechanisms for legal restraint, theological debate, and eventual reform. The Church’s dual role, as both instigator and moderator, illustrates the complexity of its legal system and the evolving attitudes within it. The decline of witch trials owed much to a revival of earlier canonical principles: the need for solid evidence, the rejection of superstition, and a growing awareness of the dangers of prosecutorial fanaticism.

Timetable 1

Most notable events in the canonical law history regarding witchcraft and witch prosecution.



5.3.2 Secular Laws on Witchcraft

While religious authorities naturally played a significant role in the persecution of alleged witches in early modern Europe, secular legal systems also contributed substantially to the spread and enforcement of witchcraft prosecutions. The development of secular laws against witchcraft in Europe reflected the societal concern about social order, crime, and heresy. These laws evolved in tandem with theological treatises, yet they often took on a distinctly civic character, regulating accusations, trials, and punishments within the frameworks of municipal and state authority.

One of the earliest significant developments in the secular legal response to witchcraft was the Holy Roman Empire’s *Carolina* code of 1532, formally known as the *Constitutio Criminalis Carolina*. This legal code, enacted under Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Regensburg in 1532, was one of the first comprehensive criminal codes in Europe and explicitly addressed witchcraft as a capital crime. The document permitted the use of torture to extract confessions and mandated execution, typically by burning, for those convicted of maleficium (Monter 1976: 52). While it maintained a connection to the notion of heresy, its framing of witchcraft was as much a civil crime against the body politic as it was a religious transgression.

In France, secular courts likewise prosecuted witches, often in parallel with ecclesiastical jurisdictions. During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, local parlements like regional appellate courts took up numerous witchcraft cases, especially in regions like Lorraine and Burgundy. The French crown's involvement remained somewhat inconsistent, with royal edicts sometimes attempting to restrain the excesses of witch hunts while simultaneously endorsing the death penalty for proven cases of maleficium (Levack 2016: 140-42). Notably, the 1682 edict of Louis XIV, while decrying superstition and fraudulent accusations, continued to sanction punishment for those whose practices caused actual harm, thereby reflecting the persistence of secular concerns about maintaining social and moral order.

In the British Isles, witchcraft legislation took a particularly distinctive form. The English Parliament passed several acts against witchcraft, beginning with the Witchcraft Act of 1542 under Henry VIII. This act criminalized witchcraft as a felony, punishable by death, though it was repealed just five years later. A more permanent statute was authorized under Elizabeth I in 1563, which made the use of witchcraft to cause harm a capital offense, while lesser magical practices received lighter penalties (Sharpe 1997: 82-85). The most well-known legislation came with James I's Witchcraft Act of 1604, which extended the death penalty to anyone invoking evil spirits or communing with familiar spirits (Sharpe 1997: 145). James I's personal interest in witchcraft, notably expressed in his treatise *Daemonologie* (1597), heavily influenced the secular legal approach in England and Scotland, contributing to a surge in prosecutions in the early seventeenth century.

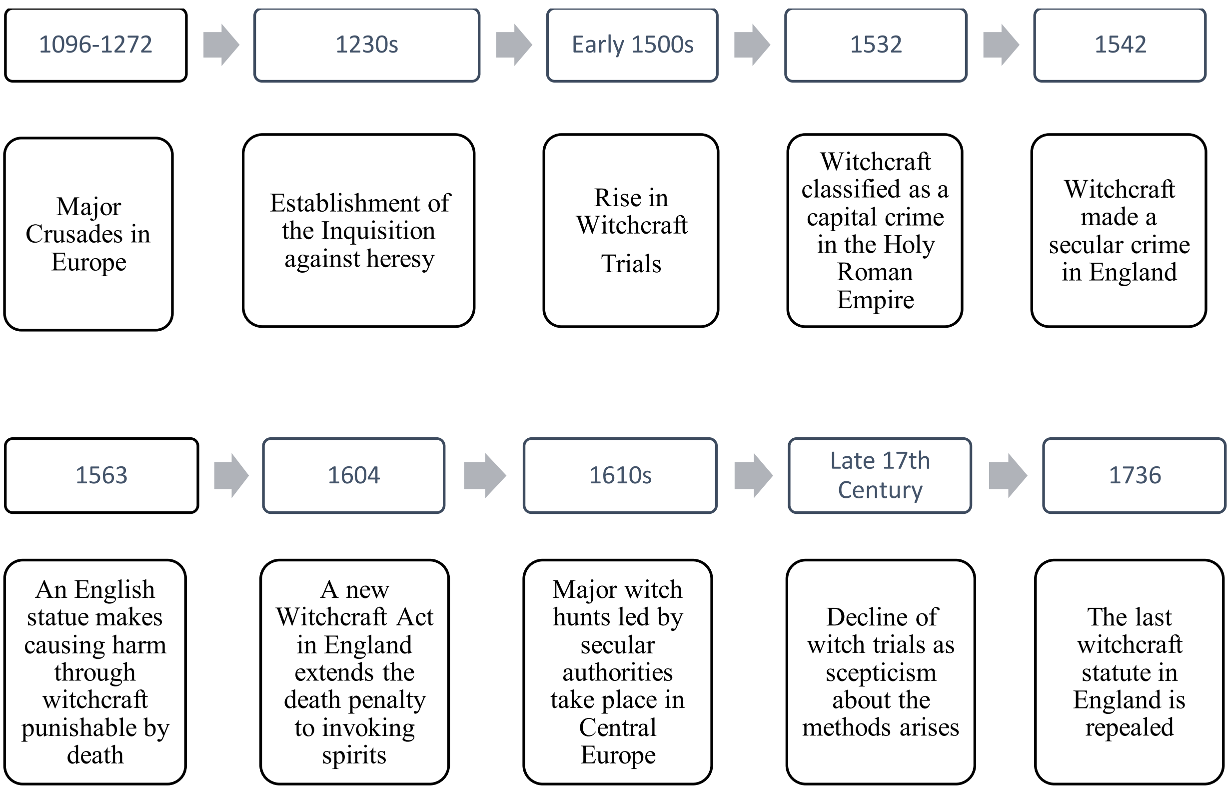
The integration of secular authority into witch trials was often motivated by concerns over public order and the maintenance of legal sovereignty. Local magistrates, city councils, and state officials viewed witchcraft not merely as a spiritual crime but also as a form of social deviance that was a possible threat to whole societies. As Stuart Clark observes, "the belief in witchcraft functioned as a means of explaining misfortune and regulating disorder within communities" (Clark 1997: 175). Thus, the creation of secular witch laws can be seen as an attempt to control both the supernatural and the socio-political consequences of fear and rumour.

By the late seventeenth century, secular laws against witchcraft began to decrease and weaken, influenced by the growth of scepticism and the professionalization of legal practice. High-profile exemptions and royal pardons reflected a shift in attitudes among state authorities, who increasingly questioned the evidentiary basis of witchcraft accusations. The last execution for witchcraft in England occurred in 1685, and the 1735 Witchcraft Act formally repealed the death penalty for witchcraft, recasting it as a crime of fraud (Levack 2016: 242). Similarly, continental European states gradually abolished capital statutes against witchcraft, driven by Enlightenment ideals and legal reforms that favoured rationality over superstition.

In conclusion, while religious institutions often supplied the theological framework for understanding witchcraft, it was secular courts and legal codes that operationalized persecution, embedding it within the machinery of state justice. The evolution of these laws highlights broader transitions in European society, from medieval anxieties about moral disorder to modern legal systems grounded in evidence and due process.

Timetable 2

Most notable events in the secular law history regarding witchcraft and witch prosecution.



5.3.3 Intersection of Canonical and Secular Laws

The legal prosecution of witchcraft in Europe cannot be fully understood without considering the interaction between ecclesiastical and secular authorities. While canonical law provided the theological framework and early procedural norms for addressing witchcraft as a spiritual crime, secular courts gradually adopted and adapted these ideas within their own legal systems, transforming witchcraft into a civic offense as well. The overlapping jurisdictions of church and state created a complex legal environment where accusations, trials, and punishments often moved between ecclesiastical and civil courts. This interplay was not always harmonious. Tensions emerged over evidentiary standards, the use of torture, and the appropriate severity of punishments. Yet in many cases, the two systems worked in tandem, reinforcing each other's authority and contributing to the escalation of witch persecutions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The following section examines this critical intersection, exploring how canonical and secular laws shaped one another and how their collaboration and conflict structured the legal realities of early modern witch trials.

In theory, canonical law claimed jurisdiction over cases involving heresy, blasphemy, and offenses against Christian doctrine, while secular courts handled crimes that endangered public order and personal safety. Witchcraft, however, existed uneasily between these categories. It was both a spiritual crime, apostasy, idolatry, or heresy in consorting with demons, and a civic offense, since witches were believed to cause harm through maleficium: poisoning livestock, damaging crops, or causing illness. As Brian Levack observes, "witchcraft lay at the intersection of religion and crime, involving both heretical and criminal elements that necessitated a dual legal response" (Levack 2016: 135). This duality meant that both church and state claimed the right to investigate and prosecute suspected witches, leading to conflicts and collaborations in legal practice.

The cooperation between secular and canonical jurisdictions is evident in cases where local magistrates deferred to ecclesiastical courts for theological judgment but retained the authority to carry out sentences. In the Holy Roman Empire, the *Carolina* code of 1532 stipulated that cases involving magic and witchcraft could be tried in secular courts, often with the consultation of clerical experts on demonology (Monter 1976: 52). Ecclesiastical officials might interrogate suspects about their beliefs and alleged pacts with the devil, while civil authorities handled accusations of physical harm or social disruption. In practice, this division was porous. Trials frequently moved between courts, and confessions obtained under ecclesiastical interrogation could be used in secular prosecutions, blurring the boundaries between spiritual and civil justice.

Yet the relationship was not always one of mutual reinforcement. Tensions often arose when ecclesiastical courts sought to impose procedural safeguards, such as requiring confession or credible evidence, while secular authorities, driven by communal panic or local politics, favoured swift and severe action. This divergence was especially visible in regions like Germany and Switzerland, where fragmented political structures enabled local lords and city councils to conduct witch trials with minimal oversight. In contrast, centralized ecclesiastical institutions like the Roman and Spanish Inquisitions exercised more restraint, often clashing with secular authorities over evidentiary standards and sentencing (Perry 2006: 52). The Spanish Inquisition, for example, was notably sceptical of popular witch beliefs and refused to accept spectral evidence or coerced confessions without corroboration, a stance that limited executions and mitigated mass panics in Iberia.

The tension between secular zeal and ecclesiastical caution occasionally produced legal compromises. In some cases, ecclesiastical courts would convict individuals of heretical sorcery but delegate the execution of punishment to secular authorities, preserving the Church's canonical prohibition against shedding blood. This practice, known as *relaxatio ad forum saeculare*, allowed the Church to enforce doctrinal purity while distancing itself from the brutality of capital punishment. As historian Stuart Clark notes, this division of labour reflected "a mutually advantageous arrangement that enabled both ecclesiastical and secular authorities to maintain their jurisdictions while addressing popular demands for the punishment of witches" (Clark 1997: 202).

The development of influential legal texts further illustrates the convergence of canonical and secular ideas. Manuals like Heinrich Kramer's & Jacob Sprenger *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487), though primarily a product of ecclesiastical jurisprudence, heavily informed secular magistrates, who used its procedural guidelines and demonological theories in their own trials. Despite lacking official papal endorsement, the *Malleus* became one of the most widely cited authorities in both ecclesiastical and civil witch prosecutions (Levack 2016: 189). Similarly, Nicholas Eymerich's *Directorium Inquisitorum* (1376), originally written for inquisitors, was adapted by secular judges seeking to navigate the theological complexities of witchcraft accusations (Monter 1976: 22). These texts effectively bridged the gap between spiritual and civic law, providing a shared framework for interrogations, evidentiary rules, and sentencing practices.

Philip Smith´s study shows the evolving role of judicial authorities during the early modern period. While ecclesiastical courts were historically known for their severe punishments, Smith's data reveal an intriguing trend: as time progressed, a growing number of witch trials fell under the jurisdiction of secular rather than ecclesiastical courts. This shift is interpreted as part of the broader reordering of political and institutional authority. As feudal structures crumbled and capitalist dynamics reshaped society, emerging secular institutions began to assert increased control over legal processes, displacing the traditional dominance of church-run courts (Smith 1992: 110–112).

The gradual migration from ecclesiastical to secular jurisdiction can be seen as emblematic of wider social transformation. Secular courts, which were often more closely aligned with the pragmatic demands of a modernizing society, adopted a legalistic framework that reflected the shifting priorities of emerging political and economic elites. Although ecclesiastical courts maintained a reputation for severity, their relative influence diminished as local and regional secular authorities sought to replace religious adjudication with institutions that supported a new order. This transition not only redefined the administration of justice but also reinforced the growing dominance of secular power in regulating social behaviour amid the uncertainties brought on by rapid economic and demographic change (Smith 1992: 110–112).

By the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the intersection of secular and canonical laws began to unravel under the weight of legal scepticism and Enlightenment rationalism. Critics like Johann Weyer and Friedrich Spee challenged the evidentiary and theological assumptions underpinning both ecclesiastical and secular trials. Weyer's *De Praestigiis Daemonum* (1563) argued that many accused witches were suffering from melancholic delusions, undermining the theological rationale for prosecution and the reliability of legal testimony (Weyer 1563: 154). Ecclesiastical courts, particularly in Italy and Spain, increasingly questioned the legality of torture-based confessions and the theological validity of witchcraft beliefs. As canonical law reasserted earlier principles of evidentiary caution and scepticism toward superstition, secular courts gradually followed suit, leading to the attenuation and eventual cessation of witch trials across much of Europe.

The intersection of secular and canonical laws on witchcraft shaped both the intensity and eventual decline of European witch persecutions. While both legal systems contributed to the ideological and procedural machinery of the witch hunt, their differing priorities, moral purity versus public order, theological orthodoxy versus civil authority, produced a complex, contested legal landscape. The convergence of these laws created periods of fierce persecution but also moments of restraint, ultimately revealing the fragile, negotiated nature of legal authority in early modern Europe.

Timetable 3

Intersection of the canonical and secular laws on witchcraft

13th Century	1532	1487-1600s	16-17th Centuries	Spanish Inquisition Era	Late 17th Century
Inquisition begins prosecuting heresy	Carolina Code with clerical consultation	*Malleus Maleficarum* widely used	Witch trials move between ecclesiastical and secular courts	Church applies stricter evidentiary standards than secular courts	Reformist voices (Weyer, Spee) influence both spheres
Heresy procedures begin blending into secular approaches to witchcraft.	Secular law integrates theological expertise; cooperation begins to formalize.	Influences both Church and state courts despite lack of official endorsement.	Confessions and procedures often overlap; shared use of torture and demonology.	Ecclesiastical scepticism contrasts with local civil fervor, especially in Germany and Switzerland.	Enlightenment values encourage both Church and state to retreat from witch trials.

6. Causes of Witch Hunts in Europe

6.1 Economic Causes

6.1.1 Indirect Effects via Demography

Philip Smith's study of witch hunting between 1300 and 1500 reveals that ecological shocks, most notably the Black Death, produced far-reaching demographic effects that radically altered the early modern European society. While Smith's analysis primarily relies on demographic data rather than direct ecological measurements, his work demonstrates that the catastrophic population losses, which occurred during the Black Death, set in motion long-lasting changes. These demographic shifts disrupted labour markets, changed traditional family structures, and converted community dynamics. In the aftermath of such drastic population decline, the surviving communities encountered severe labour shortages and resource scarcities, conditions that ultimately contributed to increased social instability and an extensive sense of collective vulnerability (Smith 1992: 99–101).

This demographic disruption also had significant economic and social implications. As large segments of the population were decimated, the surviving labour force found itself repositioned within a rapidly changing social order. Entire communities had to adapt to a limited workforce, which in turn redefined traditional roles and expectations. Notably, the shortage of labour provided new opportunities for survivors, especially women. They were now able to assume roles previously constrained by rigid feudal norms. However, these newly appeared dynamics often conflicted with established, male-dominated power structures. The resulting social friction conflict an environment for scapegoating. Witch hunts emerged as a means of rationalizing the sudden hardships and reasserting normative social control during a period of profound transformation (Smith 1992: 104–107).

The indirect effects via demography illustrate how the shock of the Black Death influenced a descend of changes that reshaped both the economic and social fabric of early modern Europe. These lasting demographic alterations not only disrupted traditional ways of life but also created the very conditions under which witch prosecutions intensified.

Federici argues that early modern authorities translated demographic anxieties into punitive measures directed at women's bodies. "Similarly, in the charge that witches sacrificed children to the devil- a key theme in the "great witch-hunt" of the 16th and 17th centuries - we can read nor only a preoccupation with population decline, but also the of the propertied classes with regard to their subordinates, particularly low-class women who, as servants, beggars or healers, had many opportunities to enter their employers' houses and cause them harm. It cannot be a pure coincidence, however, that at the very moment when population was declining, and an ideology was forming that stressed the centrality of labor in economic life. severe penalties were introduced in the legal codes of Europe to punish women guilty of reproductive crimes" (Federici 2004: 87). At the same time, demographic concern found theological expression. "Concern with population growth is detectable also in the program of the Protestant Reformation. Dismissing the traditional Christian exaltation of chastity, the Reformers valorized marriage. sexuality, and even women because of their reproductive capacity. Woman is "needed to bring about the increase of the human race," Luther conceded, reflecting that "whatever their weaknesses, women possess one virtue that cancels them all: they have a womb and they can give birth"" (Federici 2004: 87). Together these observations show how both secular law and religious reformers harnessed fears of depopulation to reinforce patriarchal control and to punish any woman deemed guilty of threatening the reproduction of labour and life.

6.1.2 Impact of Feudal Decline and the Rise of Capitalism

The intense economic transformations that accompanied the decline of feudalism and the gradual rise of capitalism in early modern Europe significantly shaped the social and material contexts in which witch hunts emerged. While many scholars have rightly emphasized the religious and legal frameworks surrounding witchcraft persecutions and prosecutions, economic historians and feminist theorists have increasingly demonstrated that material hardship, class conflict, and shifting labour relations played essential roles in witch trials. Witch hunts often coincided with periods of acute economic distress, demographic strain, and changes in systems of land tenure and resource control. These processes did not act in isolation but interacted with religious, social, and gendered dynamics to produce the phenomenon of large-scale witch persecutions.

The decline of feudal institutions and the emergence of capitalist economies profoundly reshaped early modern Europe, triggering dramatic social and economic transformations. As traditional feudal bonds weakened, communal structures and the customary obligations that had long regulated property rights began to dissolve. Smith's analysis of witch hunts suggests that this decrease of established social order created perfect ground for widespread instability. With common lands being enclosed and wealth increasingly concentrated in the hands of emerging capitalist elites, many rural inhabitants found themselves dispossessed and vulnerable. In this turbulent context, witchcraft accusations functioned as an outlet for expressing collective fears and concerns about resource competition and the redistribution of wealth (Smith 1992: 99–107).

At the same time, the shift from feudal to capitalist modes of economic organization destabilized longstanding social hierarchies. Women, in particular, experienced profound changes. In the old feudal order, customs often allowed widows and unmarried women to maintain modest claims to land or livelihood. However, as capitalist practices gained ground and property became a stricter marker of power, these informal protections crumbled. The resulting tensions, which were driven by both economic dislocation and shifts in social status helped intensify the appeal of witchcraft accusations as a means to reinforce traditional power structures. In this manner, economic transformation and feudal decline did not just disrupt communal life. They actively contributed to the escalation in both the frequency and severity of witch hunts during this period (Smith 1992: 104–107).

One of the most visible consequences of feudal decline was the disintegration of the traditional system of mutual obligations between lords and peasants, which had regulated access to land, resources, and social protection for centuries. As landowners increasingly converted communal lands into private holdings through enclosures and other forms of land consolidation, large numbers of rural dwellers were dispossessed, forcing them into waged labour markets or marginal subsistence. This dispossession disproportionately affected women, whose economic survival often depended on informal or customary rights to glean, gather wood, or practice cottage industries. Silvia Federici has argued that this process of primitive accumulation did not merely disrupt medieval economies but actively targeted women as part of a broader strategy to restructure social relations for the emerging capitalist order: “The witch hunt was the climax of a campaign to criminalize women’s control over reproduction and to delegitimize forms of labour that fell outside wage relations” (Federici 2004: 184).

As economic opportunities narrowed and communities fragmented under market pressures, disputes over access to dwindling resources became increasingly common, and those on the social margins were often blamed for communal misfortunes. Accusations of witchcraft frequently involved charges of crop devastation, cattle deaths, and unexplained illness, phenomena that gained particular salience during times of harvest failure or price inflation. Brian Levack has noted that in German-speaking territories, the most intense witch hunts often occurred during periods of economic hardship and demographic strain, when local elites sought to reassert authority and manage popular anxieties through scapegoating (Levack 2016: 186). These accusations typically targeted older, poor women who lacked male protection or family support and who might have engaged in minor economic disputes with neighbours. Their marginality made them both socially suspect and politically expendable.

In addition to exacerbating material inequality, the rise of capitalist relations also reconfigured the gendered division of labour and household economies. Under feudalism, women’s labour in subsistence agriculture, animal husbandry, and domestic production was integral to rural survival. However, as wage labour and monetized economies displaced subsistence systems, women were increasingly excluded from productive labour markets and confined to reproductive and domestic roles. This exclusion marginalized women’s economic authority and rendered many vulnerable to suspicion. Economic historian Marianne Hester argues that the ideological attack on women’s independent labour, particularly in healing, midwifery, and market trading, was a central feature of the witch hunts, designed to suppress female autonomy and reinforce patriarchal household structures under capitalism (Hester 1992: 47).

One particularly revealing dimension of this transformation was the changing nature of charity and poor relief. In medieval societies, care for the poor was regarded as a religious and social duty, integrated into local economies of reciprocity. By contrast, capitalist economies increasingly viewed poverty through a moralizing lens, treating the poor as socially deviant and economically threatening. Keith Thomas notes that many witchcraft accusations arose when poor women requested alms or food and were refused, only for misfortune to subsequently befall the household that denied them (Thomas 1997: 442). In such cases, economic hardships became morally charged, as the breakdown of communal obligations left the poor desperate and the wealthier fearful of retribution. Witch trials thus served as a mechanism for disciplining the economically marginalized and legitimizing new capitalist norms of individual responsibility and property rights.

These patterns were not uniform across Europe but varied according to local economic and social structures. In highly commercialized urban regions, such as parts of the Low Countries and Northern Italy, witch hunts were comparatively rare, as market economies had already integrated many informal labour systems or institutionalized mechanisms of poor relief. Conversely, in rural areas with fragmented political authority and weak institutional oversight, such as the German and Swiss cantons, Lorraine, and parts of Scotland, the economic upheavals of the period translated more readily into witch panics (Clark 1997: 217). Stuart Clark emphasizes that in these regions, witch trials functioned not only as spiritual or moral purges but as instruments of social control, used by local elites to regulate labour, redistribute property, and suppress dissent during periods of acute instability (Clark 1997: 241–243).

Furthermore, the witch hunts operated as a gendered strategy for regulating women's reproductive and social behaviour within emerging capitalist systems. Federici contends that early modern Europe witnessed a coordinated effort to transfer control over reproduction from women to the patriarchal family and the state, as capitalist economies required disciplined, dependent labour forces. The demonization of midwives, healers, and sexually autonomous women through witchcraft accusations thus represented an attempt to delegitimize female authority over childbirth, sexuality, and informal economies (Federici 2004: 193). The persecution of witches often coincided with broader campaigns to criminalize abortion and extramarital sexuality, reinforcing women's subordination within the patriarchal household.

6.1.3 Land Conflicts and Accusations Against Women

The economic and social disruption triggered by the decline of feudalism and the rise of capitalist economies not only destabilized communal structures but also intensified conflicts over access to land and resources. As customary obligations eroded and common lands were enclosed, many rural inhabitants found themselves displaced and vulnerable. These disruptions frequently became entangled with witchcraft accusations, as marginalized groups. Especially widows, poor women, and those lacking male protection were easy targets during periods of hardship and social strain. In many communities, such land-based conflicts were fought at the intersection of economic survival and social control, revealing the profoundly gendered nature of witch persecutions in early modern Europe.

In the aftermath of catastrophic events like the Black Death, European society underwent profound transformation. With massive losses on all fronts, not only were traditional institutions upended, but women increasingly found themselves inheriting property and assuming roles traditionally reserved for men. This shift in domestic and economic responsibilities disrupted patriarchal norms. Philip Smith's study illustrates that prior to 1420, witchcraft accusations were relatively balanced with about 47% of the accused being women. However, as more women came into their own by managing estates or claiming survival rights after the hardship period, the established order reacted strongly. In the later period, women accounted for roughly 70% of the accused, a pattern that reflects the backlash of a male-dominated society against women's growing independence (Smith 1992: 104–107).

This evolving gender dynamic was closely intertwined with disputes over inheritance and property rights. In many areas, widows and impoverished single women had once benefited from customary rights that allowed them to retain small land holdings or glean residual harvests. However, as landlords sought to consolidate properties and raise rents amid economic liberalization, these informal protections rapidly dissolved. Historian Lyndal Roper observes that "the conflicts that gave rise to witchcraft accusations were frequently disputes over property and the inheritance rights of widows and unmarried women" (Roper 2006: 74). Thus, when widows challenged these encroachments or asserted their economic rights, they were readily cast as disruptors of social order and consequently became frequent targets of witchcraft accusations.

Widows occupied an especially precarious position. Without the protective authority of a husband, they were overtly visible and vulnerable amid local unrest. For instance, in regions like Lorraine, which was renowned for its brutal witch hunts, widows often constituted a significant portion of the accused, with over 70% of those charged being women (Monter 1969: 53). Similarly, poor, unmarried women who engaged in activities such as herbalism or midwifery were easily implicated in disputes over acreage or grazing rights. Keith Thomas notes that many witchcraft accusations in England sprang from everyday quarrels such as a request for charity that, when denied, was later interpreted as an act of magical retaliation (Thomas 1997: 441).

Beyond economic grievances, the cultural construction of women's bodies and moral character in early modern society further amplified their susceptibility to persecution. As Federico and others have argued, images of women as inherently deceitful, envious, and prone to diabolic temptation provided ideological justification for harsh social controls (Federici 2004: 181). The deliberate targeting of women in witch hunts can therefore be understood as a dual process: on one hand, a reaction against the shifting economic roles that threatened established power structures, and on the other, a culturally mediated means of enforcing patriarchal norms. In regions where inheritance disputes were most acute, such as the Scottish Highlands, witchcraft accusations were deployed by local elites as a mechanism to consolidate property through male heirs, effectively regulating who could claim economic independence (Hester 1992: 57; Goodare 2016: 226).

Ultimately, these converging factors illustrate how economic and demographic crises, together with the resulting shifts in gender roles, produced fertile ground for moral panic. The rise in witchcraft accusations against women was not merely a superstitious anomaly but a deeply rooted social response to environmental and economic trauma, which was a response that sought to reassert traditional hierarchies in a rapidly transforming world.

6.1.3.2 Historical Example: Witchcraft Trials in Lorraine

The Duchy of Lorraine, a semi-autonomous territory straddling modern-day France and Germany, witnessed some of the most intense and brutal witch persecutions of the early modern period. Between the late 16th and early 17th centuries, hundreds of individuals, disproportionately women, were accused, tortured, and executed for witchcraft, making Lorraine a critical case study for examining the intersection of economic anxiety, gender politics, and legal persecution.

At the heart of Lorraine's witch trials was a volatile mix of social and economic instability. The region suffered frequent famines, plagues, and the devastations of the Thirty Years' War, conditions that exacerbated tensions over scarce resources and deepened suspicions among neighbours. Historian William Monter, in his landmark study *Witchcraft in France and Switzerland*, emphasizes how local magistrates and communal courts became complicit in escalating witch hunts, often in response to popular pressure fuelled by economic grievances and property disputes. Monter notes that "many of Lorraine's trials originated in quarrels over land rights, inheritance claims, and the status of widows or marginal women within village economies" (Monter 1969: 67).

One infamous episode occurred in the town of Remiremont in 1616, where a series of accusations spiralled after a widow named Catherine Deshayes was denounced for allegedly causing a neighbour's illness through sorcery. Deshayes, a property-owning widow with a history of disputes over pastureland and gleaning rights, was subjected to severe interrogation under torture. Her coerced confession implicated several other women, many of whom were similarly widowed or impoverished, leading to a cascade of arrests and executions. The case illustrates how accusations often stemmed from unresolved tensions over property boundaries, inheritance, and resource scarcity, with gendered suspicions amplifying these conflicts.

Lorraine’s courts, unlike some ecclesiastical tribunals elsewhere in Europe, readily employed torture and accepted spectral evidence, allowing hearsay and rumour to carry decisive legal weight. Monter underscores that Lorraine’s magistrates “frequently aligned themselves with the interests of landed elites and male heirs eager to reclaim property from female claimants” (Monter 1969: 72). Thus, the persecution of women like Deshayes served both as a purge of alleged supernatural threats and a mechanism for redistributing land and consolidating patriarchal property control. The trials in Lorraine vividly exemplify how local socio-economic conditions and legal practices converged to produce deadly witch hunts targeting society’s most vulnerable members.

6.1.4 Feminist vs. Marxist Interpretations of Land Conflict in Witch Trials

The historiography of European witch trials has long grappled with the underlying causes of these persecutions, particularly the intersections of gender, economic change, and social control. Two prominent interpretive frameworks, feminist and Marxist, offer distinct yet occasionally overlapping explanations for the centrality of land conflicts and the targeting of women in witchcraft accusations.

Feminist historians emphasize the gendered dynamics of witch hunts, interpreting them as instruments of patriarchal control designed to suppress female autonomy, especially in relation to property and social roles. Silvia Federici’s *Caliban and the Witch* has become a cornerstone of this perspective, arguing that witch persecutions coincided with the erosion of communal land rights and the emergence of capitalist property relations. Federici contends that the systematic targeting of widows, midwives, and poor women was part of a broader campaign aimed at marginalizing women’s social power and excluding them from the new economic order. She writes that “the witch hunts sanctioned a new sexual division of labour and expropriated women from access to land and the means of subsistence” (Federici 2004: 184). Feminist scholars such as Marianne Hester further highlight how witch trials functioned to discipline female sexuality and control inheritance rights, thereby reinforcing male dominance in property transmission (Hester 1992: 59). This perspective is supported by evidence showing that as many women came into their own, through inheriting property or assuming new roles in the wake of massive demographic losses, a societal backlash emerged, resulting in an increasing proportion of witchcraft accusations directed against women.

In contrast, Marxist historians situate witch persecutions within broader class struggles and emphasize the structural transformations accompanying the transition from feudalism to capitalism. According to this view, witch trials were not solely about gender but were also crucial mechanisms for managing economic and property disputes. Scholars like William Monter and Brian Levack argue that localized economic crises, enclosure movements, and the decline of feudal obligations intensified conflicts over land and resources. Monter notes that "witch hunts often intensified in regions where economic instability and class antagonism fuelled disputes over customary land rights" (Monter 1969: 45). Here, witch trials are understood as processes of primitive accumulation, as mechanisms by which emerging capitalist elites secured property interests and suppressed dissent among marginalized labourers. Although Marxist interpretations acknowledge the gendered nature of the accusations, they primarily focus on how such trials helped protect elite interests and stabilized emerging capitalist economies by reordering property relations.

Recent scholarship has sought to bridge these two approaches, recognizing that economic exploitation and the regulation of gender were deeply intertwined during the early modern period. Historian Lyndal Roper, for example, integrates feminist and Marxist insights in Witch Craze, arguing that witch hunts were simultaneously driven by economic anxieties and misogynistic cultural narratives that demonized independent women. Roper asserts that "accusations of witchcraft were a way of resolving social conflicts that involved not only property and resources but also fears about female agency and sexuality" (Roper 2006: 80). This integrative approach underscores the multifaceted nature of witch trials as expressions of intersecting forms of oppression where land conflicts became battlegrounds for both class struggles and the imposition of patriarchal order.

In sum, the debate between feminist and Marxist interpretations reveals the complex entanglement of gender and class in early modern European witch hunts. Feminist accounts stress that witch trials functioned as systematic tools for curtailing female autonomy and enforcing a patriarchal division of labour, while Marxist perspectives highlight their role in displacing communal land rights and facilitating the consolidation of capitalist property relations. Together, these viewpoints offer a nuanced understanding of witch trials as phenomena rooted in profound economic, cultural, and gendered transformations, rather than mere episodes of irrationality.

By situating these debates within the framework of moral panic, we see how land conflicts and resource scarcity were reframed as evidence of individual malice rather than structural transformation. This panic was not neutral but deeply gendered, as women's communal roles in land and subsistence economies made them particularly visible and thus vulnerable to accusations.

6.1.5 Guild Structures, Gendered Labour divisions, and Scapegoating

The economic transformations of early modern Europe fundamentally restructured labour relations, urban economies, and social hierarchies. Central to this process were the urban guilds, which were exclusive professional associations that controlled access to skilled trades, regulated labour standards, and protected economic privileges for their members. While guilds served to stabilize urban economies and preserve the interests of artisans, they also functioned as mechanisms of social exclusion, particularly along gendered lines. The restrictions placed on women's labour opportunities and the gendered division of labour contributed directly to patterns of scapegoating during witch persecutions, particularly targeting women who operated outside male-controlled economic structures.

By the 16th century, most European guilds had become highly restrictive, limiting membership to men and explicitly barring women from independent economic activity in skilled trades. Historian Merry Wiesner-Hanks notes that while women had participated in various crafts during the medieval period, their roles were increasingly marginalized as guilds professionalized and monopolized urban trades (Wiesner-Hanks 2019: 114). Widows could sometimes inherit their husband's business, but their economic autonomy remained precarious and dependent on male patronage or familial connections. The exclusion of women from official guild structures forced many into marginal or informal labour sectors: midwifery, healing, brewing, or textile work, occupations often associated with supernatural knowledge or folk traditions.

These informal economies became fertile ground for accusations of witchcraft, particularly when economic competition intensified during periods of famine, inflation, or demographic stress. Silvia Federici argues that women's displacement from guild-controlled trades and their relegation to stigmatized or precarious labour roles heightened their vulnerability to scapegoating during social crises. She observes that "the witch hunts targeted precisely those sectors of the female population that resisted exclusion from traditional forms of subsistence and social authority" (Federici 2004:183). In this sense, witch persecutions functioned as a violent enforcement of new labour hierarchies, marginalizing female healers, midwives, and traders who posed a perceived threat to male guild monopolies.

Scapegoating also reflected anxieties about the erosion of traditional household economies and the intrusion of market forces into communal life. Historian Lyndal Roper, in *Witch Craze*, explores how accusations often arose in contexts where women managed essential yet unregulated services, such as midwifery, healing, or market selling. They were blamed for misfortunes like crop failure, illness, or infant death (Roper 76). These accusations typically fell upon women who transgressed gender norms by asserting authority in economic or public spaces. Roper contends that witch hunts were, in part, "a form of social policing aimed at controlling female labour and sexuality in a patriarchal society undergoing economic dislocation" (Roper 2006: 84).

The labour dimension of witch persecutions was particularly acute in urban centres, where guild monopolies faced increasing competition from informal markets and itinerant traders. William Monter highlights the prevalence of witchcraft accusations in regions where craft guilds maintained tight control over trade and production, noting that "many urban witch trials originated from disputes between guild masters and women working illegally or in unregulated trades" (Monter 1969: 91). Such cases reveal how legal structures and patriarchal economic interests converged to criminalize female labour outside male-dominated systems.

6.1.6 Conclusion

The economic causes of European witch hunts were deeply intertwined with the sweeping social and material transformations of the late medieval and early modern periods. The decline of feudal structures, the rise of capitalist economies, and the increasing commodification of land and labour reshaped European societies in ways that generated both material hardship and profound cultural anxiety. In this context, accusations of witchcraft served as a mechanism for managing social tensions and enforcing new economic hierarchies. As feudal obligations dissolved and capitalist property relations advanced, vulnerable social groups, especially women, the poor, and the elderly, found themselves increasingly marginalized from traditional sources of subsistence. Land conflicts played a crucial role in this process, as the consolidation of property by elites and male heirs frequently provoked disputes that culminated in witchcraft accusations. The targeting of widows and impoverished women reflected not only economic competition but also patriarchal efforts to control female inheritance rights and property claims during a period of volatile legal reform.

Simultaneously, the restructuring of labour markets and the rise of exclusive guild systems restricted women's access to economic independence and formal trades. Female labourers operating in informal or stigmatized sectors, such as midwifery, healing, or market selling, were particularly vulnerable to scapegoating when economic pressures or social unrest surfaced. The witch hunts thus functioned, in part, as a means of disciplining gendered labour divisions and preserving male control over both skilled trades and communal authority.
Historiographical debates between feminist and Marxist scholars have enriched our understanding of these dynamics, with feminist historians emphasizing the gendered repression embedded in witch persecutions and Marxist scholars highlighting the class conflicts and material transformations driving these campaigns. Recent scholarship has shown that these interpretations need not be mutually exclusive; instead, witch hunts can be seen as complex social phenomena where gender, class, property, and labour intersected in the management of early modern economic change.

Ultimately, the economic dimensions of witchcraft persecution reveal the extent to which accusations of sorcery were bound up with material conditions, not simply religious superstition or legal doctrine. Witch hunts served as brutal instruments for managing the anxieties and conflicts produced by a rapidly transforming world, targeting those who threatened emerging economic orders or transgressed social hierarchies in moments of acute instability. Recognizing the centrality of economic causes within the broader history of witch persecutions not only deepen our understanding of early modern Europe but also underscores the persistent links between material inequality, gendered violence, and moral panic throughout history.

6.2 Political Causes

6.2.1 The role of state formation and centralization of power

The development of centralized political structures across Europe significantly influenced the scale and character of witch hunts. While local and regional courts had long been responsible for prosecuting alleged witches, the emergence of stronger monarchical states, bureaucratic administration, and unified legal codes altered how witchcraft was regulated. In some cases, centralization provided legal legitimacy for mass witch trials, while in others, state consolidation eventually curbed excessive persecutions as governments sought more rational approaches to justice.

During the early phases of state formation, monarchs often used witchcraft trials as a tool to reinforce their authority and demonstrate control over unruly populations. James VI of Scotland, following the infamous North Berwick trials (1590–91), employed witch hunts as part of his broader strategy to consolidate his rule and impose religious uniformity (Goodare 2004: 152–54). Similarly, Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand II encouraged persecutions in regions plagued by religious and political strife, using trials to align local rulers with imperial directives. These cases show that witchcraft accusations were often entangled with political agendas, particularly in fragile states seeking legitimacy.

However, as centralized governments matured, particularly in the late 17th and 18th centuries, legal rationalism and bureaucratic oversight began reducing prosecutions. France's Parlement of Paris limited excessive trials, leading to Louis XIV's 1682 Edict, which redefined witchcraft as charlatanism rather than heresy (Levack 2016: 240). England's 1735 Witchcraft Act similarly marked the final legal shift toward scepticism, ending the punishment of witchcraft as a capital crime and reframing it as fraud (Sharpe 1997: 271). Thus, while early state-building intensified witch hunts, the eventual legal codification and institutionalization of justice led to their decline.

6.2.2 Fragmented Authority and Judicial Autonomy

In contrast to highly centralized states, regions with fragmented political authority, particularly within the Holy Roman Empire, experienced some of the most devastating witch persecutions in European history. The empire consisted of hundreds of semi-independent principalities, bishoprics, and city-states, each with local judicial autonomy, allowing magistrates to conduct trials with minimal oversight.

This lack of central control contributed to waves of extreme persecution, most notably in areas such as Würzburg and Bamberg. The Prince-Bishopric of Würzburg, under Philipp Adolf von Ehrenberg, oversaw more than 900 executions between 1626 and 1631, illustrating how unchecked judicial autonomy could enable large-scale witch hunts (Midelfort 1972: 191). Similarly, the trials in Salem (1692), which although occurring in colonial Massachusetts, were followed similar patterns of localized governance where community hysteria, religious tensions, and weak oversight combined to generate mass prosecutions.

As Brian Levack notes, the Holy Roman Empire's legal pluralism allowed "a proliferation of local jurisdictions with varying degrees of central control," meaning that "the fate of the accused depended entirely on local magistrates and inquisitors" (Levack 2016: 198). These small-scale authorities were often driven by religious rivalries, personal vendettas, and economic struggles, leading to volatile legal landscapes where witch trials could spiral unchecked.

6.2.3 State Centralization as a Double-Edged Sword

Contrary to the assumption that centralization always reduced witch hunting, it often had the opposite effect in its early stages. Centralizing monarchies, such as those of Scotland under James VI or France under Louis XIV, initially intensified witch prosecutions as part of broader efforts to impose religious and legal uniformity. James VI's obsession with witchcraft, especially after the North Berwick trials of 1590–91, led to the 1597 Witchcraft Act and the publication of *Daemonologie*, a treatise that legitimized witch persecution and aligned it with statecraft (Goodare 2004: 152–54). James VI used witch trials not only to eliminate threats to his power but also to reinforce the divine legitimacy of his monarchy.

In Scotland, James VI's 1597 Witchcraft Act and his publication of *Daemonologie* intensified prosecutions, as witchcraft became politically weaponized to remove dissenters and validate his rule (Goodare 2004: 152–54). In France, while central institutions such as the Parlement of Paris occasionally acted to restrain excessive prosecutions, regional courts often used witch trials as tools of local dominance. E. William Monter observes that in the late 16th century, areas such as Lorraine and Franche-Comté saw intense trials despite, or because of, the extension of royal administrative structures (Monter 1976: 121–22). Here, centralization involved not just the imposition of legal codes, but the reinforcement of moral and confessional orthodoxy, often with deadly consequences.

However, over time, stronger central governments began to limit witch trials, particularly as legal rationalism and Enlightenment ideals spread through administrative elites. In France, Louis XIV's Edict of 1682 redefined witchcraft as “charlatanism” and discouraged further trials by asserting that many accusations stemmed from ignorance or fraud (Levack 2016: 240). In England, the formation of a more centralized legal system, particularly after the Restoration, led to increasing scepticism about spectral evidence and a gradual reduction in prosecutions. The 1735 Witchcraft Act marked the culmination of this legal evolution, as the British government reclassified witchcraft as a misdemeanour of fraud rather than a capital crime (Sharpe 1997: 271).

6.2.4 Institutionalization and Bureaucratic Resistance

Another key element of centralization was the rise of bureaucratic institutions that prioritized procedural uniformity and evidentiary standards. In more centralized states, such as the Dutch Republic or post-1648 Sweden, professionalized legal institutions often viewed witchcraft accusations as disruptive and irrational. In the Dutch Republic, for example, the States General discouraged local witch hunts, and by the early 17th century, the practice had all but ceased (Levack 2016: 220). The same pattern occurred in Denmark, where central authorities issued directives limiting torture and requiring concrete evidence, which significantly reduced the number of executions (Bailey 2003: 135). These shifts suggest that while emerging states initially used witch trials to project authority and unify populations under a common moral code, they later pivoted toward legal restraint as centralized governance matured. The ability of monarchs and bureaucracies to override local hysteria and enforce procedural checks played a critical role in ending the most violent phases of the witch craze.

6.2.5 Witch Trials as a Tool of Control

From a queer and trans liberation perspective, witch trials can also be read as a policing of bodies that deviated from normative expectations. The regulation of gender non-conformity, much like the repression of heresy, served to stabilize fragile hierarchies by targeting those who embodied social ambiguity and therefore threatened the coherence of authority.

Monarchs, local magistrates, and judicial authorities harnessed accusations of witchcraft to reinforce their legitimacy, discipline marginalized populations, and extend the reach of emerging state institutions. Public trials and executions served not only to eliminate perceived threats but also to showcase the moral and judicial authority of ruling elites, turning the persecution of supposed witches into a theatrical demonstration of power.

The spectacle of witchcraft prosecution provided local elites with a means to reassert dominance over communities experiencing economic, religious, or political instability. As Wolfgang Behringer argues, witch hunts often peaked during periods of crisis, including crop failures, wars, and religious schisms, precisely when consolidating authority was most urgent (Behringer 1997: 61). Beyond their disciplinary function, witch trials offered a structured outlet for expressing anxieties about shifting gender roles, economic precarity, and social change. Accusations frequently targeted women, the poor, and outsiders, which were individuals whose presence disrupted fragile hierarchies or threatened communal cohesion.
This phenomenon must be understood not as a medieval relic, but rather as a conscious exercise in governance and control, shaped by the political logic of its time. In many cases, trials were selectively mobilized by elites, with accusations intensifying in moments of upheaval and serving as a tool for redirecting social unrest away from ruling classes. Such practices align

with broader theories in political sociology, which suggest that states and elites often deploy violence strategically to manage disorder and consolidate authority (Scott 1998; Li 2007).

Moreover, witch trials served as a mechanism for enforcing conformity in an era of profound transformation. As religious institutions tightened their grip, as new political structures emerged, and as economic shifts disrupted traditional modes of survival, witch hunts provided a symbolic means of reinforcing obedience. By prosecuting supposed witches, authorities reinforced existing gendered, social, and economic boundaries, ensuring that those who resisted the expected order were silenced or removed.

Thus, witch trials were more than legal proceedings; they were political performances designed to suppress dissent, define societal norms, and stabilize regimes facing turbulence. Whether deployed to crush opposition, regulate gendered behaviour, or quell anxieties during periods of famine and war, the persecution of witches was deeply intertwined with the evolving systems of power, governance, and control that characterized early modern Europe.

6.2.5.1 Monarchical Legitimacy and the Divine Right

Monarchs often positioned themselves as divinely ordained guardians of moral and religious order, and witch hunts provided a powerful means of reinforcing this status. These persecutions were not merely religious purges. They were political tools that helped rulers solidify their legitimacy, project authority, and suppress dissent.

One of the most prominent examples is King James VI of Scotland, whose involvement in witch trials directly served his political and ideological ambitions. Following his stormy voyage from Denmark in 1590, during which he and his advisors believed they had been targeted by witches, James personally oversaw the North Berwick trials, interrogating suspects and orchestrating prosecutions to strengthen the narrative of his divine right to rule (Goodare 2004: 159). His 1597 treatise Daemonologie was more than theological argumentation, it was a form of state propaganda, justifying his religious authority, supporting state-sponsored persecution, and reinforcing the legitimacy of monarchical rule as divinely sanctioned (Levack 2016: 164).

Similarly, Frederick I of Denmark harnessed witch trials in the 1530s to consolidate Lutheran reforms, targeting individuals seen as resisting the new religious order. Witch hunts thus became a mechanism for enforcing confessional conformity, ensuring that theological deviations were aligned with political centralization and monarchical power (Bailey 2003: 127).

These cases underscore that witch trials were often orchestrated to serve royal agendas. Not only to purge alleged supernatural threats but to reinforce the idea that kings ruled by divine right. By publicly prosecuting witches, monarchs projected an image of strength and moral purity, demonstrating their ability to safeguard both God's will and national stability.

6.2.5.2 Judicial Elites

Beyond monarchs, regional courts and municipal authorities used witch trials as political and judicial performances, reinforcing their power, legitimacy, and moral discipline. Judges and inquisitors turned trials into highly public spectacles, designed to warn against social deviance and bolster the authority of judicial institutions.

In Prince-Bishoprics such as Würzburg and Bamberg, ruling elites pursued large-scale witch purges, driven not only by religious zeal but by a desire to demonstrate judicial competence and enforce religious purity. H.C. Erik Midelfort argues that these persecutions served to mobilize fear, channel social anxieties toward scapegoats, and affirm the divine mission of rulers (Midelfort 1972: 201). Between 1626 and 1631, Würzburg saw more than 900 executions, illustrating how judicial autonomy and religious fervour converged in spectacular displays of legal authority.

Local civic authorities also weaponized witch trials to assert control over volatile populations. In Trier, elites encouraged mass witch hunts between 1581 and 1593, during which over 300 people were executed. E. William Monter notes that magistrates often used witchcraft prosecutions to reassert dominance in times of political transition or instability, with trials functioning as ritualized affirmations of legal and social hierarchy (Monter 1969: 145).

These trials, though framed as exercises in justice, acted as political performances, reinforcing existing power structures and suppressing opposition. By dramatizing the punishment of supposed witches, judicial elites legitimized their authority while instilling fear in society, ensuring that challenges to their rule or religious orthodoxy were swiftly neutralized.

6.3 Religious Causes

The early modern era in Europe was marked not only by profound economic and social transformations but also by intense religious upheaval. In this section, we explore how the religious climate contributed fundamentally to the emergence and persistence of witch hunts. Deep-seated fears about diabolic forces, controversies sparked by the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and the zeal of religious institutions were all central to framing the persecution of supposed witches as a paramount spiritual and moral imperative.

Religious authorities, both Protestant and Catholic, played a critical role in constructing a narrative where witchcraft was viewed as a manifestation of heresy, immorality, and a direct pact with the devil. Texts such as the *Malleus Maleficarum* encapsulated the theological reasoning that demonized nonconformity and flagged those living outside traditional religious norms as dangerous agents of chaos. This doctrinal fervour did more than simply explain misfortune; it forged a systematic mechanism for enforcing orthodoxy and social discipline. As communities sought to navigate a rapidly fragmenting religious landscape, accusations of witchcraft became a potent tool for consolidating spiritual authority and ensuring conformity to emergent religious standards.

This section will discuss how these religious forces, through sermons, ecclesiastical legal reforms, and popular devotional literature, helped to institutionalize witch hunts. It also examines the interplay between religious beliefs, cultural anxieties, and institutional practices that together provided a compelling ideological framework for targeting those deemed subversive. In doing so, it becomes clear that the religious causes of witch hunts were not merely about combating supposed supernatural threats- they were also inseparable from a broader struggle to assert control over society during a time of profound ideological contestation.

6.3.1 Social Discipline and Gendered Control

Witch trials in early modern Europe were inextricably linked with attempts to impose moral order and reinforce patriarchal control. Those were efforts that intensified during religious reform and broader social changes. Both political and religious authorities sought to preserve orthodoxy by targeting individuals whose behaviour or social status deviated from accepted norms. Central among these targets were women. Particularly older, single, or economically marginal women whose independence challenged established gender roles. In fact, roughly 75–85% of those accused were women, most over the age of 40 (Levack 2016: 141). Women living without male protection or engaged in roles such as healing and midwifery were especially vulnerable, as their informal networks and knowledge often placed them outside traditional patriarchal structures.

Feminist scholars have argued that witch hunts were not random acts of superstition but rather a deliberate means to curtail female autonomy and control economic power. In Caliban and the Witch, Silvia Federici contends that witch persecutions coincided with the dismantling of communal land rights and the rise of capitalist ownership. Federici states that “the witch hunts sanctioned a new sexual division of labour and expropriated women from access to land

and the means of subsistence" (Federici 2004: 184). Similarly, Marianne Hester observes that witch trials functioned to discipline female sexuality and regulate inheritance rights, ensuring that property and power remained in male hands (Hester 1992: 59).

At the same time, Marxist perspectives frame witch trials as part of the broader dynamics of class struggle that emerged during the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Scholars like William Monter and Brian Levack emphasize that economic instability, along with processes such as enclosure and the decline of feudal obligations, intensified conflicts over land and resources. Monter notes that "witch hunts often intensified in regions where economic instability and class antagonism fuelled disputes over customary land rights" (Monter 1969: 45). Although these interpretations recognize the gendered aspects of witchcraft accusations, they stress that such trials were also mechanisms for protecting the property interests of emerging capitalist elites and suppressing class dissent.

Lyndal Roper bridges these two views by arguing that witch hunts were driven by both economic anxieties and deeply ingrained cultural fears about female power. In many German territories, for instance, accused witches faced charges not only of sorcery but also of engaging in diabolical sexual practices or undermining fertility, which were charges that symbolized male fears of female autonomy and its potential to destabilize tradition (Roper 2006: 94–96). Roper suggests that "witch-hunting functioned as a form of sexual discipline, targeting those whose bodies and behaviours disturbed the male-dominated social order" (Barstow 1995: 98).

This gendered regulation was further reinforced by the moral imperatives of the time. Both Protestant and Catholic reformers introduced strict codes of behaviour aimed at eliminating sin and disorder. In Calvinist Geneva, civic authorities imposed tight controls on drinking, sexuality, and superstition. Women who defied these social norms by gossiping or resisting domestic expectations were quickly linked to notions of maleficium and demonic pacts (Monter 1976: 115). In Catholic territories such as Bavaria and Lorraine, Counter-Reformation leaders equated witchcraft with heresy and impurity. Michael Ostling explains that confessions obtained under torture were laced with vivid, gendered imagery of female sexuality that reinforced the theological association between femininity and sin (Ostling 2005: 128).

Beyond institutional efforts, everyday conflicts also played a role in the formation of witchcraft narratives. Social historians like Robin Briggs have demonstrated how local disputes over land, charity, or interpersonal slights often escalated into witchcraft accusations, especially when the targeted individuals were women already viewed as "troublemakers" for failing to conform to expectations of humility and subservience (Briggs 1996: 145). In Essex, for example, long-standing reputations for defiance led to accusations against women such as Elizabeth Clarke and Joan Flower, illustrating how witchcraft served as a script for marginalizing those who challenged established hierarchies (Sharpe 1997: 78–80).

Moreover, witchcraft discourse itself was saturated with explicit sexual and misogynistic imagery. Sermons, pamphlets, and trial records portrayed the accused as lustful, defiant, and in league with Satan through grotesque sexual acts. The Malleus Maleficarum (1487) infamously claimed that “all witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable” (Kramer, Sprenger 2000; original published 1487: 114), thus depicting the female body as inherently dangerous and justifying harsh legal and physical punishments. As Christina Larner observes, “Witch-hunting was woman-hunting,” a vivid encapsulation of patriarchal fears deliberately projected onto those deemed unruly or subversive (Larner 1981: 133).

In sum, the convergence of these religious, legal, and cultural discourses reveals that witch hunts were a uniquely gendered form of social control. Whether through the suppression of female economic independence or the imposition of strict moral discipline, the processes underlying these persecutions served to maintain traditional patriarchal structures while responding to broader anxieties about social change.

6.3.2 Religious Wars and Instability

The religious conflicts of early modern Europe, particularly the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) and the English Civil War (1642–1651), created environments ripe for witch hunts. These wars fractured communities, undermined institutions, and fostered climates of suspicion and fear. In such contexts, accusations of witchcraft proliferated as means to identify and eliminate perceived enemies. Religious instability and the violent clashes between competing confessions were central to the outbreak and escalation of witchcraft trials.

The Thirty Years' War deeply destabilized Central Europe, particularly the German states, creating ideal conditions for large-scale witch hunts. As religious factions vied for supremacy and armies devastated the countryside, fear and suspicion reached fever pitches. The most severe witch hunts in European history occurred during this time, especially in Catholic territories within the Holy Roman Empire. The Bamberg and Würzburg trials, between 1626 and 1631, are among the most notorious. In Bamberg alone, over 600 people were executed under Prince-Bishop Johann Georg II Fuchs von Dornheim, who constructed a "witch prison" with torture chambers to facilitate confessions (Midelfort 1972: 205–06).

Witchcraft was framed as both a spiritual and political threat, with accused individuals portrayed as collaborators with demonic forces undermining Catholic rule.

Brian Levack argues that "the religious dimensions of the conflict provided a justification for the persecution of dissenters" and allowed local authorities to merge confessional orthodoxy with civic loyalty (Levack 2016: 211). Recent scholarship supports this view, suggesting that religious competition between Catholicism and Protestantism intensified witch hunts. Peter Leeson and Jacob Russ contend that the "witch craze" resulted from competition between Catholicism and Protestantism in post-Reformation Christendom, with churches using witch trials to demonstrate their superior ability to protect citizens against Satan's evil (Leeson, Russ 2018).

The English Civil War also saw a spike in witchcraft prosecutions, particularly in the Eastern counties. The political vacuum created by the collapse of royal authority allowed local Puritan authorities to conduct trials independently. Matthew Hopkins, the self-proclaimed "Witchfinder General," exploited this environment between 1645 and 1647, leading to over 100 executions, primarily in Essex, Suffolk, and Norfolk (Sharpe 1997: 185–86). Hopkins' activities were directly enabled by the absence of centralized legal oversight. The Long Parliament had suspended the traditional assize courts, which normally oversaw criminal justice, and allowed local magistrates broader discretion. Hopkins used this leeway to conduct rapid and poorly regulated witch trials, frequently employing sleep deprivation and leading questions to extract confessions (Gaskill 2005: 115).

James Sharpe argues that "the conjunction of military conflict, Puritan religious zeal, and administrative disarray created the perfect storm for large-scale witch-hunting" (Sharpe 1997: 189). Recent studies have further examined the psychological and cultural factors at play during the English Civil War. For instance, Sheilagh Ilona O'Brien analyses Hopkins's own pamphlet, "The Discovery of Witches," to understand how his methods and demonology were influenced by both elite and popular conceptions of witchcraft, rather than being solely "continental" imports (O'Brien 2016: 29–58). Additionally, scholars have explored how the anxieties produced by war and the crisis in masculinity contributed to the proliferation of witchcraft fantasies and trials during this period (Clark 1997: 105–08).

Ironically, as these religious wars concluded and stability returned, the credibility of witch trials diminished. The Peace of Westphalia in 1648 not only ended the Thirty Years' War but also reinforced state sovereignty and curtailed the political role of religious institutions. With this reassertion of order came a growing scepticism of the methods and assumptions underpinning witch hunts. Trials declined rapidly in the later 17th century as governments focused on rebuilding and rationalizing administration, and as Enlightenment scepticism about the supernatural gained traction among elites.

6.3.3 Protestant vs. Catholic Dynamics in Witch Hunts

The Protestant Reformation, initiated by Martin Luther in 1517, shattered the unity of Western Christendom and ushered in a century of religious warfare, doctrinal debates, and mutual accusations of heresy. In this context, witchcraft accusations often served as a weapon in the confessional battles between Protestants and Catholics.

Regions where Catholic and Protestant populations lived in a proximity, such as the Holy Roman Empire, Switzerland, and parts of France, saw particularly intense witch-hunting activity. According to Brian Levack, "Germany accounted for about 40 percent of all witchcraft prosecutions in Europe," due in part to its confessional fragmentation and lack of centralized authority (Levack 2016: 213). In these contested spaces, both Protestants and Catholics sought to portray the other side as spiritually corrupt, often associating witchcraft with doctrinal error or moral depravity.

In Protestant territories, especially those influenced by Calvinism, there was an emphasis on moral purity and godly discipline. Calvinist ministers in places like Geneva and Scotland were heavily involved in witch trials, viewing witchcraft as a direct threat to the sanctity of their “godly communities.” Scotland, under the influence of John Knox’s Presbyterianism, had some of the most intense witch hunts in Europe. Between 1563 and 1736, over 3,800 people were accused of witchcraft in Scotland, most of them women (Goodare 2004: 29). The Scottish kirk (church) played a crucial role in initiating trials, often pressuring secular authorities to act.

In contrast, Catholic territories often pursued witchcraft through the lens of heresy. Catholic demonologists, such as Jean Bodin and Nicholas Rémy, argued that witches were in league with the devil and represented a direct threat to the Church's spiritual authority. In his *Démonomanie des Sorciers* (1580), Bodin claimed that witches were “the worst of all criminals” because they had “renounced God and given themselves over to the Devil” (Bodin 2001: 108-110). This rhetoric aligned witchcraft with theological rebellion, making it an existential threat in the eyes of Catholic elites.

6.3.4 The Counter-Reformation

The Catholic Church’s response to the Reformation, widely known as the Counter-Reformation, was not only a campaign to reform internal abuses but also an aggressive reassertion of Catholic orthodoxy. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) played a key role in reaffirming Catholic doctrine, enhancing clerical discipline, and suppressing heterodox practices, many of which were associated with folk magic or popular religion.

In this context, the fight against witchcraft became part of the Church's broader battle against spiritual disorder. Catholic reformers sought to eliminate "superstition," a term that encompassed a wide range of folk beliefs, including healing rituals, protective charms, and seasonal festivals. Many of these practices were harmless or even beneficial in local communities but were viewed by reformers as remnants of paganism or satanic influence.

Wolfgang Behringer emphasizes that the religious zeal of Counter-Reformation leaders often intensified witch hunts. In Bavaria, for example, "the will to purify the faith" and the attempt to enforce religious uniformity coincided with some of the most severe outbreaks of persecution (Behringer 1997:). The infamous Würzburg and Bamberg trials of the 1620s and 1630s, which resulted in hundreds of executions, occurred in Catholic regions where Counter-Reformation fervour was at its peak. The prince-bishops of these territories used witch hunts not only to purify their populations spiritually but also to eliminate political opponents and centralize control.

The Jesuit order, one of the driving forces of the Counter-Reformation, also contributed to witch-hunting through its emphasis on education and confession. Jesuit confessors encouraged parishioners to confess not just personal sins but also the suspected sins of others, including witchcraft. This surveillance culture helped foster an atmosphere of fear and denunciation.

6.3.5 The Role of the Inquisition and the Local Clergy

Although popular culture often portrays the Inquisition as the central engine of witch trials, the reality was considerably more nuanced. The official bodies of the Spanish and Roman Inquisitions, for instance, were generally more cautious in their approach to witchcraft than their secular counterparts. Inquisitors prioritized theological heresies and doctrinal deviations over the prosecution of "popular" witchcraft, which was defined primarily by accounts of harmful magic. Nevertheless, these institutions played a crucial role in shaping both the definitions and punishments associated with witchcraft across Europe.

In Spain, the Inquisition's approach was marked by a strong preference for education and repentance rather than mass execution. After the notorious Basque witch trials of 1609–1614, Spanish inquisitors intervened decisively to halt further persecutions. In its 1614 ruling, the Inquisition declared many of the witchcraft confessions to be "based on dreams and illusions" rather than on verifiable deals with the Devil (Kamen 1998: 243). This ruling not only curtailed the scale of the trials but also set a more cautious judicial precedent. In contrast, in other regions, particularly in Italy and parts of southern France, the Roman Inquisition maintained a stricter stance. Allegations that intertwined witchcraft with heretical practices were met with severe measures, as ecclesiastical authorities in these regions were less willing to discount confessional testimony and more inclined to view such activities as direct assaults on religious orthodoxy.

Equally influential in the praxis of early modern witch hunts, however, were the local clergy, especially parish priests and Protestant ministers. These community religious figures frequently acted as the first accusers and played an essential role in translating learned demonology into a language that resonated with the lay populace. As Jonathan Barry contends, "local clergy were central to the transmission of learned demonology into the vernacular world," a process that transformed abstract, elite theories into everyday accusations (Barry 1998: 76). By leveraging their moral authority and intimate knowledge of local customs, these clergymen not only instigated witchcraft prosecutions but also framed them within a broader narrative of spiritual warfare. Their sermons and public pronouncements frequently warned against the Devil's influence, thereby reinforcing the social order by branding deviant behaviour as both a moral and communal threat.

Moreover, local clergy often collaborated seamlessly with secular authorities. Their theological justifications, which were rooted in the conviction that witchcraft was an insidious form of heresy, provided the ideological backbone for witch trials. In many cases, they participated directly in interrogations, using confessional and spectral evidence to support charges. The resulting trials became highly public spectacles, effectively turning the legal process into a ritualized assertion of both ecclesiastical and judicial power. Such acts not only served to demonize the accused but also to validate the prevailing moral order by aligning local practices with doctrinal imperatives.

In sum, the combined influence of the Inquisitions and the local clergy created a layered and multifaceted system of witchcraft control. While the Spanish Inquisition's relatively sceptical and cautious approach may have tempered the scale of prosecutions in some regions, the zealous activities of local clergy often drove popular witch hunts forward. This dual dynamic helped to shape the legal and cultural context of witchcraft, a context in which accusations were constructed as both a challenge to and a reinforcement of the prevailing social and moral order.

6.4 Ecological Causes

While witch hunts in early modern Europe have often been studied through lenses of religion, gender, and politics, the ecological context in which these events unfolded deserves equally rigorous consideration. The environmental conditions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were not simply a backdrop but a central force shaping public perception, economic life, and social dynamics. During this time, Europe experienced a prolonged period of climatic instability known as the "Little Ice Age," characterized by unusually cold temperatures, erratic weather patterns, and severe ecological disruptions.

This chapter explores how the intersection of climate change, agricultural collapse, famine, and disease contributed to the proliferation of witchcraft accusations. It draws on climatological and economic analyses, most notably Emily Oster's quantitative research, as well as historical case studies to argue that ecological distress fuelled widespread scapegoating. Witch hunts were not only cultural or theological phenomena but also reactions to acute material crises. As food security crumbled and disease spread, marginalized individuals, often older, poor women, were cast as supernatural saboteurs of communal survival.

The following sections examine three key dimensions of the ecological crisis that precipitated witch hunts: the economic consequences of the Little Ice Age; the social impact of crop failures and famine; and the moral panic exacerbated by recurrent outbreaks of disease. Taken together, these environmental factors shaped a climate of fear that fostered the tragic logic of persecution.

6.4.1 The "Little Ice Age" and Economic Hardship

The Little Ice Age (approximately 1300–1850), with a particularly harsh phase between 1560 and 1630, played a pivotal role in shaping the environmental, economic, and social landscape of early modern Europe. This prolonged period of climatic instability subjected communities to extreme weather fluctuations, including prolonged winters, torrential rains, failed harvests, and bitterly cold summers. As Wijaczka describes, this era saw "long and cold winters, springs with flooding and frost, rainy summers, and windy autumns," punctuated by occasional yet destructive heat waves and violent storms (Wijaczka 2022: 2022). These unpredictable and volatile climatic conditions severely disrupted agricultural cycles, shortening growing seasons and reducing crop yields. The subsequent food shortages and economic instability created an atmosphere of desperation, in which communities increasingly sought scapegoats to explain their misfortunes.

One of the clearest statistical correlations between environmental distress and witch trials comes from Emily Oster's economic analysis of climate fluctuation and persecution patterns. She found that a one standard deviation drop in temperature corresponded to a 0.20 standard deviation increase in witch trials across Europe (Oster 2004: 220). Years of particular cold, such as during the Maunder Minimum (1645–1715), witnessed renewed waves of witch-hunting, suggesting that economic crises caused by climate events directly contributed to the intensification of social persecution. The cooling of global temperatures reduced wheat and rye production, exacerbating price inflation and widespread famine. In some northern regions, the cooling of ocean currents disrupted fish migration patterns, undermining coastal economies dependent on cod and herring fisheries (Fagan 2000). The resulting economic hardship disproportionately affected peasant communities, where food scarcity, rising debt, and deteriorating social cohesion fuelled the conditions necessary for witch panics.

While environmental pressures were significant, they did not operate in isolation. Religious reformations, regional warfare, and demographic shifts magnified the effects of climate-induced hardship. Chronic conflicts, such as the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), drained national treasuries and devastated agricultural economies. Parker's argument that the "fatal synergy" of climate change, warfare, and disease characterized the General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century provides further context for how environmental degradation contributed to widespread instability and heightened accusations of witchcraft (Parker 2013: 42-45). This complements Oster's thesis that economic decline correlates with social violence, reinforcing how systemic shocks triggered by environmental stressors intensified cultural anxieties and persecution.

The belief that witches could control weather patterns further embedded these accusations in the fabric of early modern society. The idea that witches were responsible for storms, droughts, and blights was widely reflected in legal documents and popular pamphlets. The Malleus Maleficarum, one of the most influential witch-hunting manuals of the time, proclaimed that witches had the ability to "raise and stir up hailstorms and tempests" (Summers 1971). Trials often featured accusations of weather magic, particularly in agrarian communities where failing crops and ruined harvests were existential threats. The theological endorsement of such beliefs added legitimacy to the prosecution of witches, reinforcing the idea that their eradication was necessary to restore natural balance.

Importantly, Oster's research shows that economic decline due to environmental change was not uniform across Europe. She used urbanization and population density as proxies for economic resilience, finding that regions with stronger economies, such as England's Home Circuit and parts of Switzerland, had fewer witch trials, even during colder periods. In contrast, trials surged in regions such as Hungary and Franche-Comté, where economic stagnation and climate distress converged (Oster 2004: 223–24). These findings underscore how local institutional strength, including access to markets, storage capacity, and legal norms, played a crucial role in determining whether climatic hardship escalated into witchcraft persecution.

The interplay between environmental crisis and witch trials demonstrates that these persecutions were not merely products of superstition but were deeply embedded in socio-economic conditions. Communities struggling with failed harvests, famine, and political unrest sought explanations for their suffering, and witches provided convenient scapegoats. The climate instability of the Little Ice Age, particularly in its most extreme decades, thus played an undeniable role in fuelling the fear, suspicion, and accusations that defined witch-hunting culture in early modern Europe.

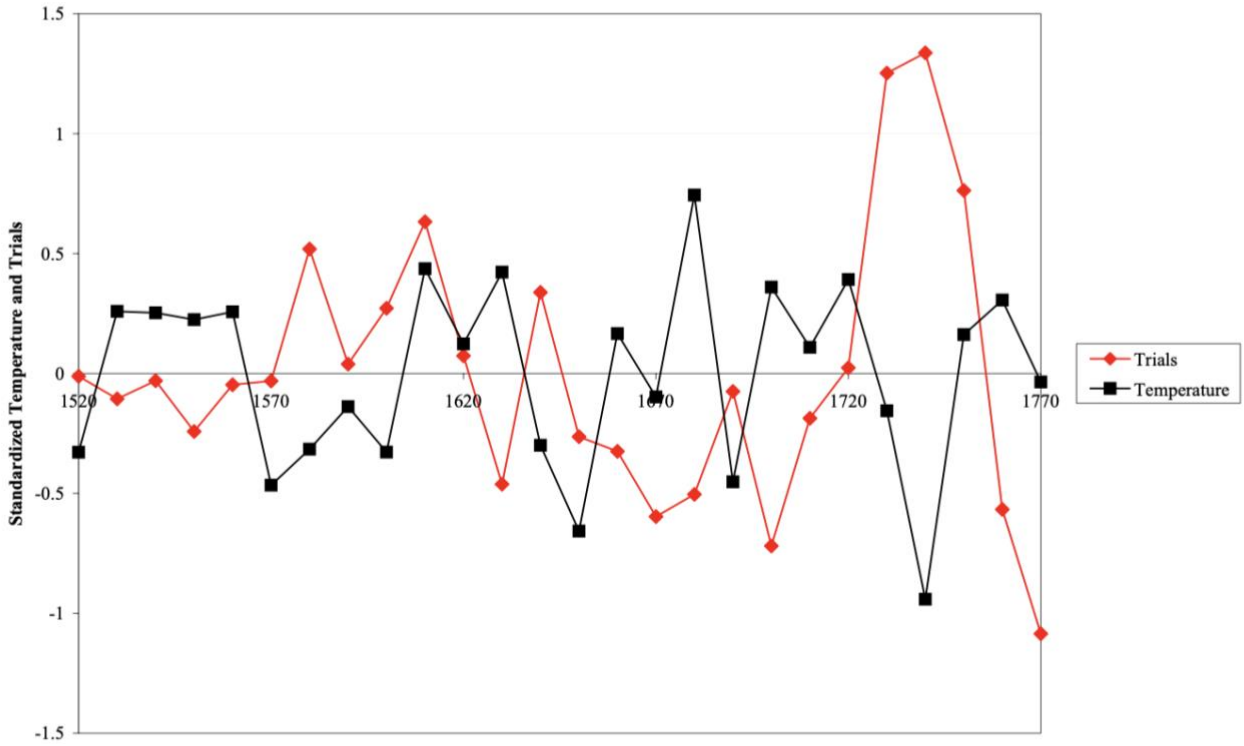


Figure 1. Temperature and Trials over Time 1520-1770 (Ostling 15)

6.4.2 Crop Failures, Famine, and Scapegoating

Repeated crop failures and ensuing famines were perhaps the most immediate causes of public fear and anger. Famine was not merely a biological crisis but also a psychological one, undermining trust in communal structures and forcing people to find targets for blame. As traditional systems of explanation, both natural and religious, failed to account for prolonged hardship, suspicion turned to neighbours, particularly marginalized women.

The example of Jeanne de Biau, known as Nane de Mathieu, is emblematic. In 1643, as famine loomed and the largest witch-hunt in French history erupted in southern Languedoc, she was accused of casting spells to bring storms that destroyed crops. She allegedly threw objects into fountains to "create tempests and storms which destroy the fruits of the earth" (Ankarloo et al. 2002). Accusations like this were not isolated but part of a broader pattern linking weather misfortunes directly to witchcraft.

Oster emphasizes how economic conditions intensified this process of scapegoating. Her analysis reveals that regions experiencing economic stagnation or decline, measured through proxy indicators like urban growth and population density, were more likely to experience witch trials. Areas with fewer cities of over 10,000 inhabitants or slower population growth saw significantly more trials, even after controlling for other factors (Oster 2004: 224–225). These findings suggest that the perception of witches as disruptors of agriculture was not only culturally embedded but also driven by structural economic despair.

In a context where the average peasant could not control or explain meteorological patterns, the notion of a witch, someone with the power to curse the harvest, spoil milk, or halt rainfall, offered a tangible outlet for anger and grief. The convergence of environmental failure and social desperation created fertile ground for witchcraft accusations to take root.

Behringer's climatic history notes that extreme weather events were frequently cited during actual witch trials. In Franconia (modern Germany), peasants often explicitly linked frost, hailstorms, or droughts to local witches. After the unusually cold May of 1626, a mass of new trials was initiated in Zeil am Main, where villagers blamed "storm-raisers" for crop destruction (Behringer 1999: 342).

Oster's work supports this correlation statistically, but Behringer provides qualitative evidence that reinforces it culturally. He observes that weather-induced crop losses were interpreted not as natural disasters but as deliberate acts of sabotage, often by individuals already marginalized by age, gender, or poverty. These trials served a cathartic social function, reaffirming a sense of moral control over nature by eliminating a supposed supernatural agent of chaos.

Additionally, Lyndal Roper suggests that these scapegoating patterns drew on symbolic associations between women and nature. The notion of women controlling fertility extended beyond the womb into the fields, linking "disordered" female bodies with failed harvests

(Roper 2006: 144). This deepens your gendered analysis of famine-related witchcraft accusations.

6.4.3 Disease Outbreaks and Moral Panic

In addition to climatic and economic stress, outbreaks of disease played a central role in destabilizing early modern societies and contributed significantly to the emergence of witch-hunt phenomena. The bubonic plague, along with smallpox, typhus, and various localized epidemics, repeatedly decimated populations during this period. In the wake of these catastrophic events, communities were forced to confront a sudden collapse of familiar social and economic orders. As Philip Smith demonstrates in his quantitative evaluation of witch hunting between 1300 and 1500, the Black Death was not only a demographic shock but also a catalyst for collective anxiety. This prolonged wave of mass death left communities searching for explanations, and the resulting moral panic helped to catalyse the scapegoating process that would later manifest in witch persecution (Smith 1992: 99–101).

Moreover, the recurring nature of these diseases deepened societal fears. The periodic return of the plague into the seventeenth century, for example, created cycles of instability, each wave reawakening fears of divine retribution and the influence of hidden malevolent forces. In a society already reeling from disaster, such events provided a ready explanation for a host of misfortunes. Communities, lacking reliable knowledge of the complex causes behind these health crises, often turned to supernatural explanations. Witch hunts, then, should be seen as part of a broader strategy to restore order, an attempt to impose human logic on events that seemed chaotically irrational (Smith 1992: 99–101).

Ecological factors that compounded these effects also contributed to the climate of fear. One particularly compelling example is ergot poisoning. Ergot, a fungus that grows on rye under damp conditions, produces alkaloids capable of causing convulsions, burning sensations, hallucinations, and even death. The symptoms of ergotism like tremors, delirium, and other distressing signs were frequently interpreted as evidence of possession or diabolical influence. Although outbreaks of ergotism are difficult to trace systematically, several historians have argued that episodes of ergot poisoning may have triggered localized witch panics, especially following unusually wet summers that encouraged the fungus's growth.

These health crises, however, did not affect all members of society equally. Disease and epidemics amplified existing social stressors, particularly along gendered lines. When sudden and unexplained illness struck, often decimating children or affecting livestock, communities urgently sought out a culprit. Elderly or widowed women, already vulnerable due to limited social protection and often reliant on community charity, became frequent targets. As Emily Oster points out, these women were sometimes seen as burdens on scarce resources during times of crisis, which magnified the likelihood of accusations (Oster 2004: 217). Oster also references the syphilis-misogyny hypothesis, suggesting that rising rates of sexually transmitted infections and related mental health issues further reinforced negative perceptions of women's bodies as inherently corruptive (Oster 2004: 216).

The convergence of famine, disease, and the harsh conditions of the Little Ice Age created what some scholars have called a "perfect storm" for persecution. Behringer (1999) argues that the agricultural disruptions and economic hardships of this period nurtured an atmosphere of existential uncertainty. In such an environment, moral panic was almost inevitable. This pattern is not confined solely to early modern Europe. Comparative research by Edward Miguel on modern witch killings in Tanzania shows that extreme environmental stresses, whether from flood or drought, correlate with increased witch killings, particularly of older women perceived as burdens during times of food scarcity (Miguel 2005: 6). Similarly, Slack emphasizes that linking disease to moral transgressions such as impurity, selfishness, or blasphemy, provided fertile ground for casting witches as bearers of divine wrath (Slack 2012: 44).

Taken together, these factors reveal that witch hunts were not merely irrational anomalies. Rather, they were deeply patterned social responses to a complex interplay of ecological trauma, demographic collapse, and social disruption. Outbreaks of disease, compounded by ecological stressors and economic hardship, transformed public fear into moral panic. One that was channelled into the persecution of those who deviated from accepted gender norms or who were otherwise marginalized. This multifaceted response underscores the broader point that witch hunts emerged as a means for early modern communities to impose order on a reality that had become both unpredictable and perilous.

This demonstrates the full utility of Cohen's concept of moral panic. Ecological shocks did not simply produce fear but created fertile ground for elites to redirect that fear onto symbolic figures of deviance. Combined with feminist sociology, this lens shows that women's bodies became the terrain upon which collective anxieties about disease, hunger, and death were fought.

6.4.4 Conclusion

The ecological context of the European witch hunts offers a crucial, if often overlooked, key to understanding the social dynamics of fear, blame, and violence in early modern communities. The Little Ice Age did more than chill the atmosphere, it strained economies, broke agricultural systems, and heightened the emotional temperature of everyday life. In a world where scientific explanations for weather and disease were unavailable or unconvincing, the turn to supernatural causality was not irrational, but rather a culturally conditioned response to overwhelming distress.

By drawing direct links between deteriorating climate, economic hardship, and increased witchcraft prosecutions, we uncover a pattern of persecution driven by desperation. When crops failed and children starved, when the seas yielded no fish and the plague arrived at the village gate, people looked for someone to blame. The witch was not simply a religious or social deviant, but also a surrogate for systemic failure.

Importantly, this pattern is not confined to the past. As Emily Oster and Edward Miguel both suggest, ecological stress continues to provoke violence and scapegoating in the present. In modern Tanzania, Miguel documents how extreme rainfall, whether drought or flood, leads to an uptick in witch killings, especially of older women viewed as economically burdensome during lean periods (Miguel 2005: 1156–57). These findings resonate with the early modern European experience and underline a sobering truth: when institutional safety nets are weak, and survival is uncertain, marginalized individuals remain at risk of being targeted as scapegoats.

For scholars and practitioners of international development, this insight carries urgent implications. As climate change intensifies across the Global South, the potential for localized violence, cultural backlash, and moral panic rises in tandem. Development efforts must therefore address not only the technical challenges of food insecurity and disaster resilience, but also the social and psychological dynamics that emerge in crisis. Historical precedents like the European witch hunts serve as warnings about how environmental shocks, when coupled with inequality, gendered exclusion, and weak governance, can ignite waves of persecution.

Recognizing these ecological roots does not minimize the importance of other factors: religious conflict, misogyny, legal practices, but it deepens our understanding of why witch hunts occurred with such intensity during this specific historical moment. The tragedy of the witch trials lies not only in the cruelty of their accusations, but also in the way they reflected the very real suffering of societies pushed to the brink by environmental catastrophe.

7. The End of European Witch Hunts

The European witch hunts, which reached their peak between the 1560s and the 1650s, began to decline in the late seventeenth century and largely came to an end by the early eighteenth century. This decline was not sudden or uniform across Europe, but rather the result of a complex interplay of evolving legal standards, changing religious priorities, growing scepticism among intellectual elites, and broader shifts in cultural attitudes toward superstition and evidence. Understanding how and why the witch hunts ended is as crucial as understanding why they began.

In the eighteenth century, legal prosecutions for witchcraft came to an end, marking a shift in societal attitudes toward the phenomenon. This period saw the emergence of modern historical analysis, driven by the intersection of critical scholarship and philosophical inquiry. Witchcraft began to be studied as a historical and cultural phenomenon rather than a pressing contemporary issue. The era's rationalist perspective dismissed the existence of sorcery and witchcraft as objective realities, attributing the witch trials to superstition, ignorance, and deliberate fraud. This critical approach laid the foundation for understanding witchcraft within a broader historical context (Russel 2019: 28-30). One of the most significant factors in the decline of witch hunts was the increasing legal scepticism regarding the validity of witchcraft accusations and the evidentiary standards used in trials. As judicial systems developed and centralized across Europe, legal authorities began to question the use of torture to extract confessions, the reliability of spectral evidence, and the credibility of accusations often based on personal grudges or hearsay. In many regions, appellate courts overturned local witchcraft convictions or imposed stricter procedural safeguards. For instance, in France and the Holy Roman Empire, courts increasingly required material evidence and discouraged the use of torture, which was a major shift from earlier practices (Levack 2016: 278). This legal rationalism gradually made it more difficult to prosecute alleged witches, especially as judicial authorities became wary of the hysteria and social chaos such trials could unleash.

Intellectual transformations brought about by the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment also played a crucial role in ending the witch craze. Emerging scientific methodologies encouraged naturalistic explanations for phenomena once attributed to magic or demonic intervention. Illness, crop failure, and infertility, which were all formerly blamed on witches, were increasingly understood in terms of medicine, biology, and environmental conditions. Philosophers and scientists such as Reginald Scot in *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) and later thinkers like Johann Weyer and Balthasar Bekker, openly criticized belief in witchcraft as irrational and un-Christian (Barstow 1995: 186; Roper 2006: 232). These writings helped foster a growing intellectual climate of scepticism and empiricism that eroded the cultural foundations of the witch trials.

Religious change also contributed to the decline of witch hunts. The intense confessional conflicts of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, during which both Protestant and Catholic authorities viewed witches as enemies of the true faith, began to subside by the late seventeenth century. As religious tensions cooled and the wars of religion gave way to more stable political arrangements, the fervour that had once fuelled the persecution of witches diminished. In many areas, church authorities began to see witchcraft accusations as distractions from more pressing theological and moral concerns, or as superstitions unworthy of serious attention (Levack 2016: 281). The churches' retreat from witch-hunting was especially important, given the role clergy had often played in both instigating and legitimizing trials.

The decline was also demographic and social. In areas that had experienced the worst of the witch hunts, communities had been torn apart by waves of executions. Fear and trauma began to shift public sentiment; neighbours and relatives were increasingly unwilling to participate in or support trials that might end in the death of someone they knew. In some cases, public outcry after high-profile miscarriages of justice, such as the Würzburg and Bamberg trials in Germany, led to formal prohibitions on further prosecutions. The sheer brutality of these trials, which often involved children and clergy, shocked even the legal and religious authorities who had once endorsed them (Roper 2006: 243).

By the early 1700s, the intellectual, legal, and religious grounds for witch-hunting had eroded to the point that new accusations were often dismissed out of hand. The last known execution for witchcraft in Europe occurred in Switzerland in 1782, though prosecutions had effectively ended decades earlier in most countries. While belief in witchcraft persisted among the populace, it no longer had the institutional backing needed to support mass persecution. The end of the European witch hunts marked a profound cultural shift. From a worldview shaped by supernatural fear and ecclesiastical authority to one increasingly grounded in reason, evidence, and state governance.

8. Case Study: Witchcraft in Poland

This chapter turns to the Polish witch hunts as a case study that illustrates both the integration of European-wide dynamics and the persistence of regionally specific trajectories. The phenomenon of witchcraft persecution in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth cannot be understood in isolation, as it was shaped by transnational currents of religious reform, shifting legal institutions, and the broader socio-economic pressures that marked early modern Europe.

At the same time, Poland's distinctive political and cultural environment produced particular outcomes that invite closer attention. The aim of this chapter is therefore to examine how universal dynamics of fear, gendered control, and moral panic intersected with local traditions, institutions, and power structures.

The chapter asks several interrelated questions. How did witchcraft accusations emerge and evolve within the unique environment of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth? In what ways did Polish legal practices both resemble and diverge from those of other European regions? How did religious pluralism, including the coexistence of Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox communities, shape both accusations and prosecutions? And to what extent did social hierarchies and gendered expectations determine the vulnerability of the accused?

To address these questions, the analysis draws upon a range of primary and secondary sources. Archival records of local trials, when available, provide valuable insight into the language of accusation, the use of evidence, and the strategies of defence. Legal codes and statutes illustrate the shifting role of both secular and ecclesiastical jurisdictions in defining witchcraft as a crime and determining its punishment. The works of historians such as Małgorzata Pilaszek, Michael Ostling, Jacek Wijaczka, and Wanda Wyporska form an indispensable foundation for understanding the specific Polish context. Their contributions allow for a careful reconstruction of both legal frameworks and the everyday social pressures that made accusations plausible and persuasive.

Methodologically, this case study is informed by comparative historical analysis, which allows for Poland to be situated within broader European transformations while highlighting divergences that reflect local political, religious, and cultural factors. A particular emphasis is placed on gender, since women formed the majority of those accused, and on the economic and social conditions that made them vulnerable to charges of maleficium. Attention is also given to regional variations within Poland itself, which reveal that the witch hunts were not uniform but deeply shaped by local disputes, traditions, and community dynamics.

By examining Poland as a case study, this chapter seeks not only to document the particularities of witchcraft persecution within the Commonwealth but also to illuminate how larger European processes of social control, economic transformation, and religious conflict were refracted through a specific historical setting. The Polish experience underscores the importance of integrating both the universal and the particular when analysing the witch hunts, reminding us that persecution was never the product of superstition alone but of complex historical negotiations between fear, authority, and survival.

8.1 The Beginning of Witch Hunts in Poland

The first documented execution of a witch in Poland occurred on May 24, 1511, when a woman was burned in a field near the village of Waliszewo. This event is often cited as the starting point of Polish witch hunts, not because it was the first accusation or trial, but because it marks a fundamental shift from ecclesiastical to secular jurisdiction. Prior to this moment, witchcraft cases in Poland were typically heard in the courts of the Church, where sentences were limited to penance and monetary fines rather than capital punishment (Pilaszek 2007). The Waliszewo case, though lacking in detailed records, symbolizes the growing willingness of secular authorities to enforce harsh punitive measures in witchcraft cases.

Some scholars have associated the formal beginning of widespread witch trials in Poland with the Sejm Constitution of 1543, also known as the *Konstytucja Sejmu Krakowskiego*. According to this interpretation, the Constitution authorized secular courts to try and execute individuals for witchcraft, initiating a legal framework for state-led persecution (Ronowska 2016). However, historian Michael Ostling challenges this reading, arguing that the 1543 legislation in fact reaffirmed the Church's jurisdiction over witchcraft and did not empower secular courts in the manner some claim. Ostling cites the actual language of the Constitution, which explicitly states that ecclesiastical courts were to handle matters of witchcraft, along with other "spiritual" offenses (Ostling 2005).

Ostling further notes that while the Constitution did contain a vague clause allowing secular interference if harm occurred, this provision was either misunderstood or deliberately ignored by later commentators. Moreover, 16th- and 17th-century Polish court records reveal little reliance on the Constitution in actual legal proceedings. Instead, judges often cited biblical authority, especially *Exodus 22:18* ("Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live"), or offered no formal legal justification at all, even in high courts (Ostling 2005).

An important reflection on the 1543 Constitution appears in the anonymous 1639 treatise *Czarownica powołana abo krótka nauka i przestroga z strony czarownic* ("The Appointed Witch or a Short Lesson and Warning from Witches"). The text not only delves into theological and legal questions surrounding witchcraft, but also offers insights into accepted methods of interrogation, the treatment of women who died in prison, and the conditions under which torture could be applied or ended. Significantly, the author refers to the 1543 Constitution as clearly designating the Church courts as the appropriate venue for witchcraft cases, showing that contemporary understandings diverged sharply from some modern interpretations (Kowalczyk 2019; Ostling 2015).

As Ostling concludes, the Constitution of 1543 "had neither a positive nor a negative impact on the history of witch prosecutions in Poland" (Ostling 2005). Rather than a single legislative or cultural turning point, the Polish witch hunts appear to have emerged organically through a patchwork of local factors, legal ambiguities, and changing religious sensibilities. This complexity reinforces the caution voiced by historian Wanda Wyporska: “There are clearly dangers in applying a monolithic causal explanation to a rich and complex phenomenon with local, regional, and national similarities and differences” (Wyporska 2013).

Further complicating efforts to understand the scale of persecution in Poland are persistent exaggerations of the number of trials and executions. Although early estimates suggested tens of thousands of victims, more recent scholarship, drawing on archival trial records and demographic data, places the number of executions in Poland closer to 500, paralleling the figures from neighbouring Hungary (Ankarloo et al. 2002; Klaniczay 1994). Despite regional spikes in prosecutions, particularly around 1700, Poland never hosted a witch hunt of international notoriety, nor did it experience the sustained state-sponsored inquisitions found elsewhere in Europe.

8.2 European Influence on Witchcraft in Poland

The witch hunts that gripped early modern Europe were not confined to any one nation, and Poland was deeply embedded in the broader continental patterns of persecution. Scholars argue that Poland, though somewhat distinct in its legal approach to witchcraft, was heavily influenced by the intellectual, religious, and judicial trends of Western Europe. Michael Ostling contends that Poland was no different from other European countries, noting that the influence of the Inquisition shaped perceptions of witchcraft and the mechanisms for its prosecution (Ostling 2015). Similarly, Wanda Wyporska, in Witchcraft in Early Modern Poland, 1500-1800, asserts that “Poland was au fait with European intellectual currents of the time. This is also supported by Polish authors’ familiarity with contemporary debate, both pro- and anti-witchcraft” (Wyporska 2013). This suggests that Polish legal theorists, theologians, and local magistrates were well aware of ongoing discourse elsewhere, incorporating elements of both scepticism and fervour into their own judicial systems.

Between 1500 and 1650, Europe witnessed one of the most intense periods of witch-hunting in recorded history. Historians estimate that approximately 100,000 individuals were tried for witchcraft across the continent, with nearly half of them convicted and executed. While these numbers, spread over 150 years, might not seem overwhelming, the psychological impact of these trials was profound. Witch panics permeated all levels of society, from rural villagers fearing supernatural threats to ruling elites seeking explanations for political and natural crises. Though magic and sorcery had existed as concepts since antiquity, the early modern period saw an intensified effort to eradicate witchcraft, driven by heightened fears surrounding the occult. Prior to 1500, accusations of witchcraft had been sporadic, with a few notable cases leading to prosecutions. However, from the sixteenth century onward, both the frequency and severity of witch trials escalated dramatically.

Polish witch hunts followed these European trends, though they were often shaped by Poland's unique legal traditions and regional governance structures. Unlike Western Europe, where ecclesiastical courts played a dominant role, Poland relied primarily on secular courts for witchcraft trials. This meant that accusations and punishments were often dictated by local magistrates rather than centralized religious authorities. While many areas had no record of witch trials at all, certain regions became hotspots for persecution, particularly in Royal Prussia, Greater Poland, and parts of Silesia, where German and Czech influences introduced more aggressive prosecution methods.

The scale of witch hunts varied significantly across Europe. Some towns and cities never experienced a major trial, while others became notorious for mass persecutions. Poland, though not among the worst offenders, had its own significant cases. In extreme instances, hundreds or even thousands of individuals were charged with witchcraft and sentenced to execution. One of the most infamous Polish cases took place in Doruchów in 1775, where fourteen women were accused and burned at the stake. It was a shocking event considering that Poland had formally abolished witch trials in 1776, just one year later.

The European intellectual and legal environment also influenced Polish perspectives on witchcraft. While scepticism toward witch trials was growing in parts of Western Europe by the late seventeenth century, Polish judicial authorities continued to justify persecutions. Legal scholars debated the necessity of harsh punishments, referencing German and French texts that supported the eradication of witches. Many Polish magistrates were familiar with continental treatises such as Jean Bodin's Démonomanie des Sorciers (1580), which argued for ruthless suppression, and Heinrich Kramer's Malleus Maleficarum (1487), which provided step-by-step guidance for identifying and prosecuting witches (Summers 1971). These texts circulated widely in Poland, reinforcing legal structures already in place.

Poland's association with broader European trends also extended to popular beliefs about witchcraft's relationship with weather, agriculture, and natural disasters. Just as in Germany, Switzerland, and France, Polish trials often included accusations of weather magic, famine causation, and livestock blight, anxiety over environmental hardship fuelling fears of supernatural malevolence (Wijaczka 2022). The Little Ice Age, which caused crop failures and extreme weather fluctuations, helped amplify such fears, contributing to waves of persecution. By the early eighteenth century, scepticism regarding witch trials had grown, mirroring shifts in Western European thought. The Polish Sejm (parliament) formally abolished witchcraft trials in 1776, making Poland one of the later nations to outlaw these practices. However, informal accusations and mob executions persisted in some rural areas well into the nineteenth century, reflecting the lingering grip of supernatural fear. The country's proximity to German, Czech, and Austrian territories meant that judicial trends, including both scepticism and persecution, crossed borders, influencing Polish attitudes and legal frameworks alike.

Ultimately, Poland's experience with witchcraft was shaped by both its internal legal traditions and external European influences. While Polish courts operated independently, they did not exist in isolation. The intellectual, religious, and legal currents flowing through Germany, France, and the Holy Roman Empire directly informed Poland's approach to witch prosecutions, embedding its trials within a broader continental phenomenon.

8.3 Comparing Polish Witchcraft Legal Framework to broader European trends

The legal treatment of witchcraft in early modern Poland reflected both commonalities with broader European practices and distinct features shaped by the region's unique socio-political and legal context. While Polish courts operated under many of the same ideological assumptions that drove witch hunts elsewhere in Europe, namely, the association of witchcraft with heresy, female deviance, and social disorder, they did so within a more fragmented and localized judicial framework.

In much of Western Europe, particularly in the Holy Roman Empire, legal structures around witchcraft prosecution were shaped by imperial codes such as the *Constitutio Criminalis Carolina* of 1532. This legal text standardized torture protocols and evidentiary requirements, encouraging a bureaucratic approach to witch trials across German-speaking territories (Levack 78). Poland, by contrast, had no equivalent national criminal code until much later. Instead, legal authority was decentralized, with town courts (*sądy miejskie*), noble (manorial) courts, and church courts exercising concurrent jurisdiction. Each of these applied a varying mix of Roman, canon, and customary law, resulting in highly inconsistent practices across regions (Wijaczka 2013: 102).

This legal pluralism gave Polish witch trials a notably localized character. Accusations were often initiated by members of the community and processed by local authorities with minimal oversight from centralized institutions (Behringer 220). In contrast to Spain, where the Inquisition exercised tight control, or Scotland, where royal commissions were frequently involved, Polish prosecutions were shaped more by community dynamics and less by top-down ecclesiastical or state intervention (Roper 198).

Torture was legally permissible in Polish courts but generally required approval from a higher judicial authority, such as a land court (*sąd grodzki*) or the king's representative. Still, as in other parts of Europe, confessions obtained under torture were central to convictions, and suspects were often subjected to ordeals such as the "ordeal by water" or physical examinations for witches' marks (Kłoczowski 2000: 154). These practices were consistent with those found in German and French trials, but they persisted longer in some Polish regions, due in part to the slower diffusion of Enlightenment legal reforms.

Gender played a similar role in shaping the profile of the accused in Poland as it did elsewhere in Europe. Women, particularly widows, healers, and those perceived as socially disruptive were the ones who got disproportionately accused. However, the specifics of gendered suspicion often drew on local folklore and village-level social norms, rather than formal theological discourse. This rootedness in local culture underscores the importance of customary law and popular belief in shaping Polish witch trials (Barstow 1995: 114).

In sum, the legal framework for prosecuting witchcraft in Poland was marked by a blend of imported legal traditions and resilient local practices. While Polish trials mirrored broader European trends in their demonological assumptions and treatment of women, the decentralized and pluralistic nature of Polish legal institutions led to significant regional variation in judicial process and outcomes. This makes the Polish case a compelling lens through which to examine how legal institutions mediate fear, gender, and authority in periods of social stress.

8.4 Key Witch Trials and Regional Patterns

The geography of witchcraft trials in Poland during the early modern period reveals distinct regional patterns, shaped by varying legal traditions, religious influences, and levels of urbanization. Unlike in some parts of Western Europe, where a centralized inquisition drove mass trials, Poland's witch persecutions were fragmented and deeply local, reflecting the decentralized nature of its legal system and the influence of neighbouring cultural and legal norms.

Kraków, as the capital of the Polish Crown and a key ecclesiastical centre, exhibited a relatively moderate approach to witchcraft trials. The city's courts, influenced by universityeducated legal professionals and canon law traditions, often hesitated to convict individuals based on witchcraft allegations alone. Cases were generally handled with caution, and executions were relatively rare compared to rural areas. Wanda Wyporska notes that elite centres like Kraków maintained "a higher threshold of legal evidence," and often prioritized procedural legitimacy over sensational accusations (Wyporska 2013).

In contrast, Poznań, located in western Poland and closer to the German-speaking territories of the Holy Roman Empire, saw more frequent and severe witchcraft trials. The region's proximity to Germanic legal customs, where witch persecutions were more intense, likely played a role in its harsher treatment of accused witches. The Poznań region also had a stronger secular court system, which was more inclined to accept confessions extracted through torture and less bound by ecclesiastical procedures. As a result, towns and villages in Greater Poland often witnessed local panics leading to multiple executions, especially in the 17th century (Ronowska 2016).

Silesia, a region characterized by a complex mix of ethnic groups and political affiliations, was among the most notorious in Poland for the ferocity of its witch hunts. Now partly within modern Poland's borders, Silesia was under Habsburg rule for much of the early modern period, and its legal system mirrored that of the Austrian and German lands, where torture and mass trials were more common. One of the most infamous episodes in Silesian witchcraft history occurred in Bytom (Beuthen) and Nysa (Neisse), where a series of mass trials led to the execution of dozens of accused witches, including women, men, and even children. These trials were characterized by the extensive use of torture, coerced confessions, and mob hysteria (Ankarloo et al. 2002).

One particularly well-documented case is the Kasina Wielka trial of 1634, in which several women were accused of causing illness and crop failure through sorcery. The trial was notable for involving both lay and ecclesiastical authorities and for the detailed confessions extracted under torture. Although not among the most lethal cases, it illustrates how belief in maleficium (harmful magic) could lead to rapid escalation from suspicion to execution in smaller rural communities (Kowalczyk 2019).

Regional disparities in Poland also meant that some areas, especially those with significant Jewish or Orthodox Christian populations, saw virtually no witchcraft prosecutions. Both of these communities, governed by their own religious laws, did not incorporate witch-hunting into their judicial practices. This further emphasizes how confessional identity shaped regional attitudes toward witchcraft persecution (Ostling 2005).

Despite the variation in intensity and frequency, witch trials across Poland shared some common features: a reliance on accusations from neighbours, often tied to interpersonal conflict, the widespread use of torture, and the belief that witches could cause tangible harm through supernatural means. However, no Polish city or region ever approached the level of systematic persecution seen in places like Würzburg or Bamberg in Germany. As Bengt Ankarloo and his co-authors observe, even in regions like Silesia, where witch hunts reached alarming intensity, Poland's trials remained relatively small in scale compared to Western Europe (Ankarloo et al. 2002).

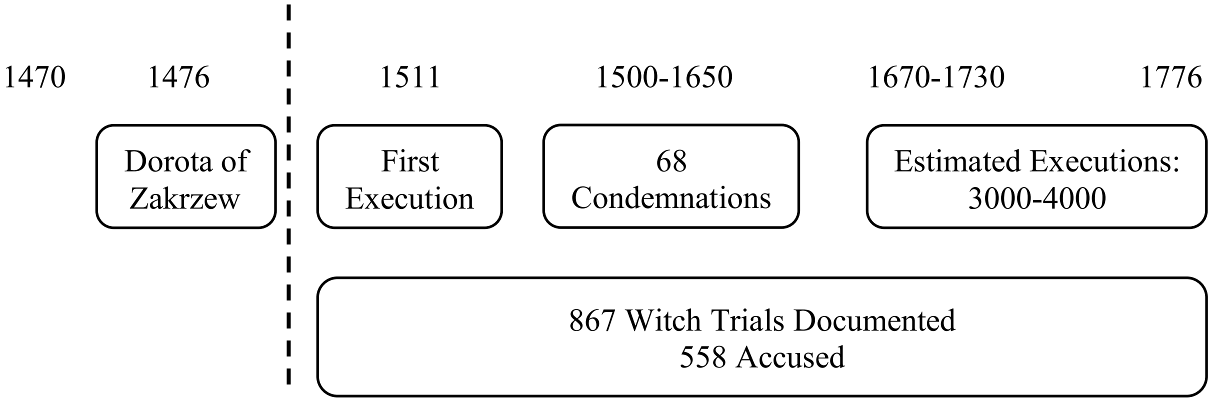
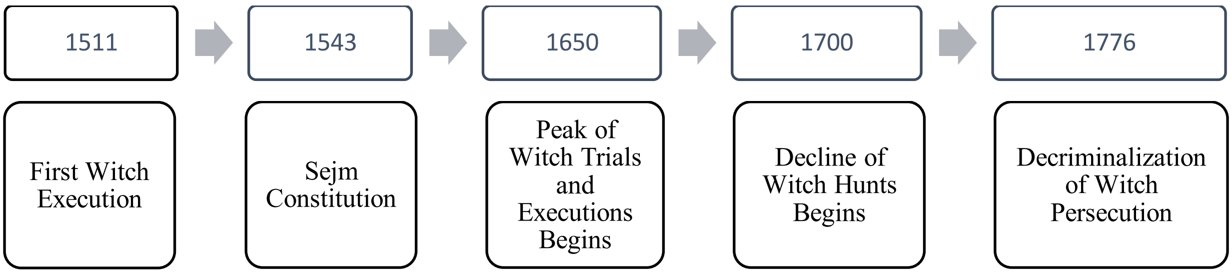


Figure 3. A timeline showing the progression of witch trial activity in Poland

Timetable 3

Legal milestones in the Polish witch trials.



8.5 Socio-Economic & Religious Factors in Poland

Here, intersectionality becomes a crucial tool for understanding the Polish context. Gender interacted with class, regional identity, and confessional affiliation to determine who was accused. While women were the majority of victims, their vulnerability cannot be understood outside the interplay of poverty, minority status, and religious difference in a pluralistic Commonwealth.

The history of witch hunts in Poland is deeply embedded in the socio-economic and religious dynamics of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth during the early modern period. While Poland shared many characteristics with Western Europe, it also exhibited distinct regional, legal, and institutional conditions that influenced the frequency and nature of witchcraft persecutions. These trials were shaped by the complex interplay between economic hardship, decentralized judicial authority, religious transformations, and deeply rooted folk beliefs, each contributing to an environment in which accusations of witchcraft could flourish.

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth remained largely agrarian and feudal, with its economy revolving around agricultural production. Unlike centralized states with uniform legal enforcement, Poland's szlachta (nobility) wielded immense power, overseeing judicial matters through private and manorial courts. This decentralized system meant that noble-controlled jurisdictions had the autonomy to prosecute witches without significant oversight from central authorities (Levack 2016: 216). As a result, witch trials varied widely across different regions, often reflecting local socio-economic tensions rather than national policy. In times of crop failure, famine, or disease, economic insecurity drove communities to seek scapegoats, leading to a proliferation of accusations, particularly in areas suffering from war-induced instability (Monter 1976: 143).

Additionally, Poland's interactions with Western Europe introduced new economic models, including mercantilism and expanding trade networks, which disrupted traditional feudal structures. These changes, while benefiting noble landowners, placed significant strain on peasant communities, heightening social anxieties and increasing susceptibility to witchcraft allegations. Economic distress was particularly acute during periods of climatic instability, such as the Little Ice Age, which worsened agricultural yields and reinforced fears of supernatural intervention.

Poland was unique in early modern Europe due to its religious diversity. The Commonwealth was home to Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Muslims, making it one of the most religiously pluralistic states on the continent (Wyporska 2013: 27). This environment fostered relative tolerance in the sixteenth century, but by the seventeenth century, the Counter-Reformation and Jesuit influence led to a tightening of Catholic orthodoxy, coinciding with an increase in witchcraft prosecutions.

While the Polish Catholic Church was not the sole driving force behind witch trials, it played a crucial role in shaping perceptions of heresy and moral disorder. Fear of religious dissent, especially within Protestant and Orthodox communities, became entangled with accusations of witchcraft, mirroring trends elsewhere in Europe where religious sectarianism contributed to social tensions (Levack 2016: 223; Wyporska 2013: 31). The Jesuits actively promoted a climate of religious conformity, reinforcing notions that witches were agents of heresy and supernatural disruption.

Unlike in regions such as Spain or Italy, where the Inquisition exercised direct control over witchcraft trials, Poland's secular courts played a more dominant role. However, religious rhetoric influenced judges and local magistrates, legitimizing accusations that targeted individuals perceived as spiritually or socially deviant. This period saw an increase in cases linking witchcraft with immoral behaviour, blasphemy, and sorcery used to harm others, rather than theological concerns alone.

Beyond formal religious institutions, folk beliefs and pre-Christian Slavic traditions played a significant role in shaping the Polish experience of witch trials. Many rural communities incorporated older spiritual customs into Catholic practices, creating a unique syncretic belief system that did not always align with official Church doctrine.

This blending of Catholicism and Slavic traditions made individuals who engaged in folk healing, midwifery, herbal medicine, and divination particularly vulnerable to witchcraft accusations (Wyporska 2013: 44). Women, who often served as community healers and midwives, were disproportionately targeted. Unlike Western European witch trials, which frequently emphasized a pact with the Devil, Polish trials centred on maleficium, witches using magic to harm others (Monter 1976: 151). Many cases involved accusations related to weather magic, fertility curses, and livestock blight, underscoring the practical fears driving these prosecutions rather than strictly religious concerns.

The socio-economic and religious landscape of Poland played a defining role in shaping its witch hunts. Economic instability, which was often exacerbated by feudal decentralization and environmental hardship, combined with Catholic orthodoxy, judicial autonomy, and deeply ingrained folk traditions to create an atmosphere in which witchcraft accusations could emerge and thrive. While Poland exhibited unique factors influencing its witch trials, it also remained deeply connected to broader European trends, where religious conformity, social upheaval, and economic distress fuelled persecutions. Understanding these intersecting influences provides a more comprehensive picture of why witch hunts took place in Poland and how they differed from other parts of Europe.

8.5.1 Gender Distribution of Witchcraft Accusations in Poland

Witchcraft persecutions in early modern Poland, much like those in other parts of Europe, were marked by a marked gender imbalance that has intrigued historians and feminist scholars alike. Although Polish archival records are fragmentary, owing in part to disruptions during the twentieth century, studies based on the surviving data provide important insights into the gendered dynamics of these trials.

Significantly, the gender dynamics of witch hunts in Poland showed both parallels and departures from Western trends. While women were the majority of the accused, men also appeared as defendants, and many trials revolved around interpersonal disputes, property conflicts, or village rivalries rather than doctrinal deviance (Wyporska 2013: 39).

One of the few detailed studies available is Małgorzata Pilaszek's research on witch-hunts in Poland during the 16th to 18th centuries. In her study, Pilaszek documents that, for the period between 1500 and 1650, there were approximately 68 condemnation cases recorded, with 49 of these cases involving women and 19 men, which roughly translates to a gender distribution of 72% women and 28% men (Pilaszek 2002: 103–132). Although this dataset is limited in size, it offers a snapshot of how early witch trials in Poland disproportionately targeted women. The pattern observed is consistent with the broader European tendency; comparative research suggests that, over the entire period of witch persecutions in Poland, estimates place the proportion of female accusations at between 75% and 85%, with some localized studies reporting figures as high as 90% in certain rural regions (Ostling 2005: 318–333).

This pronounced gender bias is significant because it not only reflects cultural constructions of femininity and the suspicion of female autonomy, but it also highlights the intersection of gender, economic marginality, and social control. In this sense, the numerical evidence, despite its limitations, reinforces the view that witchcraft accusations were deeply gendered in nature and served as a mechanism for maintaining social order through the regulation of female behaviour.

While the available data from Pilaszek's work provides a solid foundation for understanding early Polish witch trials, broader national estimates that incorporate additional case studies and comparative analyses further support the conclusion that witchcraft accusations in Poland, whether measured through documented trials or estimated executions, continued to disproportionately impact women. Moreover, the consistency of these figures with trends observed elsewhere in early modern Europe underscores that the gendered nature of witch hunts was not an isolated phenomenon, but rather a deeply rooted social process influenced by intersecting cultural, economic, and institutional forces.

8.6 Historical Example: Podlasie

The region of Podlasie, located in northeastern Poland, offers a compelling case study for examining the localized nature of witchcraft accusations in the early modern Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. As a borderland area marked by ethnic and religious diversity: including Polish Catholics, Ruthenian Orthodox Christians, Jews, and a smaller Muslim Tatar population. Podlasie reflected many of the broader socio-cultural tensions present in the Commonwealth while also exhibiting unique regional characteristics.

One of the most notable features of Podlasie was its patchwork of jurisdictions, where noble, ecclesiastical, and royal courts operated simultaneously. This overlapping legal structure allowed for considerable variation in how witch trials were conducted and prosecuted. In noble courts, particularly in rural areas, trials were often informal and driven by communal pressures. Local lords acted as judges, and evidence standards were low; spectral evidence and hearsay were frequently admissible (Wyporska 2013: 52). This legal flexibility enabled communities to pursue accusations rooted in interpersonal disputes, economic envy, or unexplained misfortunes.

The Podlasie region also saw significant influence from Counter-Reformation efforts. Jesuit missions established in the late 16th and early 17th centuries aimed to reassert Catholic dominance, sometimes at the expense of local Orthodox or pagan practices (Levack 2016: 222). These efforts contributed to a growing association between religious "otherness" and diabolic suspicion. Folk healers or individuals practicing syncretic rites, many of them women, were often accused of maintaining un-Christian beliefs and performing magic deemed threatening to social and religious order (Monter 1076: 149).

A well-documented case from the mid-17th century involves a woman named Katarzyna from a village near Bielsk Podlaski, accused of causing a nobleman's illness through witchcraft. The accusation, initially grounded in rumours about her use of herbs and charms, escalated into a full trial after the man's condition worsened. Under threat, Katarzyna confessed to consorting with the Devil, likely coerced or fabricated to fit theological expectations, and was subsequently executed (Wyporska 2013: 73). This case reflects the convergence of folk practices, gendered suspicion, and elite anxieties that fuelled witch persecutions in the region.

While Podlasie never experienced mass hunts on the scale of those in Germany or Scotland, the trials that did occur demonstrate how local dynamics, particularly legal autonomy, religious tensions, and folk belief, interacted to produce periodic outbreaks of persecution. Moreover, the use of witchcraft accusations to marginalize women or punish socially disruptive figures underscores the disciplinary role such trials played in small, tightly knit rural communities.

8.7 Unique Aspects of the Polish Witch Hunts

The trajectory of witchcraft persecution in Poland demonstrates several unique features when compared to its Western European counterparts. While the broader European witch craze peaked in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, the Polish witch hunts followed a distinct temporal and cultural rhythm. Most notably, Poland exhibited a delayed but intensified surge of witch trials in the 17th and early 18th centuries, coinciding with particular structural and ideological dynamics within the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

Polish witch trials began relatively late compared to those in France, Germany, and Switzerland. While ecclesiastical courts in Poland had dealt with accusations as early as the 14th and 15th centuries, these typically resulted in minor penances rather than capital punishment. It was not until the 17th century that executions became widespread. It was a delay attributed in part to the slower consolidation of state power and the ambiguous jurisdictional boundaries between secular and ecclesiastical courts (Ostling 2015).

Data from trial records, such as those compiled by Baranowski and later revised by Ankarloo and Monter, show that the most intense periods of persecution in Poland occurred between 1675 and 1725, with regional hotbeds emerging in Silesia, Wielkopolska, and the Kraków area (Baranowski 1952, Ankarloo 1999, Monter 1976). This timeline places Poland's peak persecution significantly later than the famed German or Scottish trials, many of which had subsided by the early 1600s. As Wyporska argues, "Polish witchcraft persecutions reflect a delayed reaction to the same social, religious, and legal pressures felt elsewhere, rather than their absence" (Wyporska 2013: 104).

Another critical feature of Polish witch trials lies in the legal and cultural pluralism of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The decentralized nature of its governance structure created fertile ground for inconsistent and often highly localized prosecutions. Poland did not possess a singular, centralized legal system that enforced uniformity across trials. Instead, trials occurred in a complex matrix of noble courts (sądy ziemskie), municipal courts (sądy miejskie), and ecclesiastical jurisdictions, each with differing attitudes toward the legitimacy and punishability of witchcraft (Ronowska 2016; Ostling 2005).

The Commonwealth was also a multiethnic and multi-confessional state, home to significant populations of Jews, Orthodox Christians, Protestants, and Catholics. This diversity, while intellectually rich, led to ambivalent cultural responses to witchcraft, with some minority communities notably resistant to participating in such persecutions. Jewish and Orthodox communities, for instance, rarely engaged in witch trials, which further fragmented the societal consensus on the necessity or legitimacy of such actions (Klaniczay 1994; Ankarloo and Henningsen 2002).

Moreover, the Polish intellectual tradition included notable clerical scepticism about witchcraft, a point evidenced in the treatise *Czarownica powołana* (1639), which advocated procedural caution and emphasized the need for judicial restraint (Kowalczyk 2019). This perspective echoes through some Polish legal texts of the period, which, unlike the harsh prescriptive codes found in the Holy Roman Empire, did not universally mandate death for convicted witches and instead often left room for leniency or ecclesiastical control.

8.8 Conclusion

The Polish case study provides valuable insight into the five guiding research questions of this thesis and highlights how the European witch craze unfolded in regionally specific ways.

First, with regard to economic transformations, Polish witch trials reveal the close relationship between accusations and local struggles over property, land, and livelihoods. In a society where peasant households were often vulnerable to scarcity and conflict, accusations of maleficium served as mechanisms for expressing and negotiating economic insecurity. Local rivalries, disputes over inheritance, and tensions within village economies repeatedly found expression in the courtroom, suggesting that witchcraft persecution in Poland was deeply tied to material survival and the distribution of resources.

Second, the question of state formation and judicial autonomy takes on a distinctive form in the Commonwealth. Unlike Western European states where centralizing monarchies and inquisitorial institutions orchestrated large-scale persecutions, Poland's decentralized political and legal structures fostered a highly localized pattern of trials. Municipal and noble courts presided over the majority of cases, resulting in regional variation rather than a uniform national policy. This fragmentation not only limited the scale of persecution but also underscores how institutional design directly shaped the trajectory of witch hunts.

Third, the role of religious reform and confessional conflict was significant but more diffuse than in countries divided starkly between Catholic and Protestant blocs. Poland's remarkable religious pluralism, marked by the coexistence of Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox Christians, and Jews, meant that witchcraft accusations were not monopolized by a single religious authority. Instead, they were entangled with local confessional rivalries and anxieties. The presence of multiple faith communities created a complex environment in which accusations could be deployed as instruments of both theological and social competition, while also preventing the establishment of large-scale, centralized inquisitorial campaigns.

Fourth, the intersection of gender, class, belief, and region emerges clearly in Polish trials. As elsewhere in Europe, most of the accused were women, often widows, healers, or socially marginal figures. Gendered expectations surrounding female behavior, reproduction, and economic independence made women especially vulnerable to suspicion. Yet regional and social differences also mattered. Local customs, folk beliefs, and ethnic distinctions shaped patterns of accusation and the credibility of testimony, illustrating that persecution was never determined by gender alone but by intersecting hierarchies of power and identity.

Finally, ecological stress and the experience of the Little Ice Age also played a role in Polish witch hunts. Crop failures, poor harvests, and disease outbreaks frequently coincided with local surges in accusations, reflecting the broader European pattern in which environmental shocks fueled moral panic and the search for scapegoats. The Polish example thus confirms the ecological dimension of persecution while demonstrating that environmental crises interacted with pre-existing legal, religious, and social tensions to produce accusations.

Taken together, the Polish case underscores that witch hunts in the Commonwealth cannot be reduced to superstition or isolated outbreaks of mass hysteria. They were embedded in structural transformations that connected economic insecurity, fragmented political authority, religious diversity, gendered hierarchies, and ecological vulnerability. By situating Poland within the wider European context while also recognizing its distinctive features, this chapter reaffirms the broader argument of the thesis: witch hunts were sophisticated strategies of social regulation, shaped by universal forces yet always refracted through the specific cultural and institutional contexts in which they unfolded.

9. Conclusion

This thesis has argued that European witch hunts were not irrational aberrations but structured responses to profound transitions in economy, politics, religion, and ecology. Through a combination of feminist sociology, intersectionality, queer and trans liberation theory, as well as the moral panic theory, the analysis has situated witch persecution as a mechanism of governance through fear, one that policed the boundaries of community, gender, and belief while responding to crises that destabilized early modern Europe. By focusing on Poland as a case study, the research has also demonstrated how universal forces of transformation were refracted through distinctive regional contexts, producing patterns of prosecution that were at once locally specific and deeply entangled with continental trends.

The first research question asked what economic transformations made witch hunts both possible and appealing to local elites. The evidence shows that the collapse of feudal relations and the gradual rise of capitalist property regimes created insecurity over land, inheritance, and communal rights. Marginalized groups, particularly women who lived outside patriarchal household structures, became convenient scapegoats in moments of material scarcity. In Poland, accusations often coincided with disputes over resources, suggesting that witchcraft trials were not simply irrational outbreaks of superstition but deeply embedded in the material struggles of survival.

The second question addressed how processes of state formation, judicial authority, and legal pluralism shaped the character of prosecutions. Unlike centralized monarchies that oversaw large-scale persecutions, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was defined by fragmented authority and localized courts. This produced a patchwork of legal practices in which outcomes varied significantly from region to region. The autonomy of municipal and noble courts both limited the potential for mass persecutions and created openings for selective, community-driven accusations. The Polish case demonstrates that the architecture of governance was as decisive as ideology in shaping the trajectory of trials.

The third question concerned religious reform and confessional rivalry. Across Europe, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation elevated witchcraft into a diabolical conspiracy, turning the accused into symbols of heresy and disobedience. In Poland, where Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, and Jewish communities coexisted, accusations did not flow from a single doctrinal authority but were shaped by confessional competition and local anxieties. Religious pluralism produced both fuel and restraint for witch hunts: clerics sometimes incited trials, but skepticism within certain traditions tempered them. The Polish experience highlights how religion's role was not uniform but contingent on local balances of power.

The fourth question asked how intersecting hierarchies of gender, class, belief, and region influenced persecution. The findings affirm that most of the accused were women, especially widows, healers, or those who transgressed expected roles of obedience and dependence. Yet gender never acted in isolation. Women who were poor, ethnically marked, or religiously marginal were disproportionately vulnerable, while elite women were often protected. Intersectionality reveals witch hunts as a convergence of oppressions rather than a simple narrative of misogyny. In Poland, regional customs and folk traditions further inflected accusations, showing that vulnerability was always situated within multiple overlapping hierarchies.

The fifth and final question concerned the role of ecological disruptions linked to the Little Ice Age. Periods of famine, failed harvests, and epidemic disease consistently correlated with surges in witchcraft trials. Witchcraft accusations functioned as cultural translations of ecological trauma, offering communities a tangible explanation for catastrophe in the absence of scientific causality. In Poland as elsewhere, climate-induced hardship sharpened suspicions and created conditions for moral panic. The ecological dimension thus confirms that witch hunts were not random but deeply tied to systemic shocks that threatened survival.

Taken together, these answers reinforce the thesis that witch hunts operated as strategies of social regulation. They were mechanisms for managing insecurity, disciplining gender and labour, legitimizing authority, and translating crisis into blame. The theoretical lenses employed here deepen this interpretation. Feminist sociology underscores the centrality of patriarchal control. Intersectionality highlights compounded vulnerabilities across social categories. Trans liberation theory reminds us that gender variance and non-normativity have long been targets of repression. Moral panic studies illuminate how fear was organized, amplified, and directed toward symbolic figures of deviance.

The Polish case study enriches this argument by showing that persecution did not unfold in a uniform way but was mediated by decentralized governance, religious pluralism, and local community dynamics. This regional specificity does not weaken the broader thesis but strengthens it by demonstrating how universal pressures found expression through particular institutional and cultural configurations.

By weaving the theoretical framework back into the empirical findings, this thesis demonstrates how feminist sociology, intersectionality, trans liberation, and moral panic are not abstract lenses but practical tools for decoding the witch hunts. Each reveals dimensions that would otherwise remain obscured: patriarchal discipline of women's labour, compounded vulnerabilities at the intersections of identity, repression of non-normative embodiment, and the translation of systemic crises into targeted violence.

In conclusion, witch hunts should not be dismissed as archaic eruptions of ignorance. They were calculated, patterned, and socially functional responses to crisis. They helped societies navigate economic transition, religious fracture, and environmental disaster, albeit at the cost of scapegoating the most vulnerable. The legacy of these persecutions endures in the ways that gendered violence, legal pluralism, and ecological stress continue to generate scapegoating in contemporary contexts. By understanding witch hunts as both historically specific and structurally resonant, we are reminded that the dynamics of fear, exclusion, and control remain central to how societies manage uncertainty. This thesis therefore contributes not only to the historiography of early modern Europe but also to ongoing debates in international development about how violence emerges in periods of structural transition.

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