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The Witchcraft Trials in Finnmark, Northern Norway – A Survey

The witchcraft trials in Finnmark, the northernmost district of Norway, took place towards the end of a period that saw persecution of witches all over Europe. The witch-hunt in Finnmark was an offshoot of the European witchcraft trials, taking place ca 1450–1750, with the seventeenth century as the peak period. Accusations of witchcraft were treated before the courts, as criminal cases. During the European witchcraft persecution, around 100.000 persons were accused of practising witchcraft. Out of these, 40.000–50.000 persons were executed, most of them sentenced to death in fire at the stake. The most intense witchcraft trials took place in Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Poland, Scotland and East Finnmark. In Norway as a whole around 750–800 persons were accused of practising witchcraft, whereof about 300 persons were executed. Norwegian courts started to pass death sentences in witchcraft trials in the late sixteenth century, and the persecution lasted till the eighteenth century.

The Finnmark witchcraft trials took place during the period 1600–1692. In the course of these trials 135 persons were accused of practising witchcraft, 91 of which were executed. This means that two-thirds of those who were accused of witchcraft in Finnmark, received death sentences. The main part of the death sentences were passed in Vardø in East Finnmark, and the executions most likely took place at Steilneset, the place of execution in Vardø. The rate of death sentences resembles that in parts of Europe where witches were persecuted particularly rigorously. When we assess the extent of the persecution in Finnmark, we also have to take into account the size of the population. In the seventeenth century, the population of Finnmark was around 3000, which was 0.8% of the total population of Norway. Nevertheless, 16% of all Norwegian witchcraft trials took place in Finnmark, and around one-third of all death sentences in Norwegian witchcraft trials were passed here. These figures indicate heavy persecution in the district of Finnmark. In addition to sentences of execution, persons accused of witchcraft were outlawed, submitted to public whipping or fined.

What we know about the witchcraft trials in Finnmark some 400 years ago, mainly derives from court records of trials heard in local courts. The court records were entered into protocols which are now stored in the Regional State Archives of Tromsø, Norway. The court records tell us what happened to a person from the moment he or she was brought before the court until sentence was passed. The sources we have from the witchcraft trials in Finnmark are in very good condition with regard to readability, as they have been well preserved. They are unique nationally and internationally in terms of completeness of cases and richness of details.

Wherever suspected witches were being prosecuted, the State played an important part. Such was the situation in the joined kingdom of Denmark-Norway, too. The powers of the State were ingrained in legislation, in the functioning of the judiciary and in the activities of the Church. There is no doubt that State powers, together with the activities of the king's officials, were decisive for the outcome of the trials. The Danish-Norwegian monarch Christian IV, who reigned from 1588 to 1648, was an eager witch-hunter. The highest-ranking officers of the Crown in Finnmark had, as part of their agenda, cleaning the district of witches. These officers were influential with regard to the initiation and the continuation of witchcraft trials. At the top of the hierarchy was the Royal Commander of Vardøhus District, staying at Vardøhus Castle. He was titled District Governor until 1660, after which his title was Regional Governor. The government officials in Finnmark were zealous; every time a new District Governor was installed, an increase in the number of witchcraft trials can be observed. Some of the officials were in office for a long period of time, for instance the Scotsman John Cunningham, who was District Governor at Vardøhus from 1619 to 1651, during which period 41 persons were executed for practising witchcraft. Also during the periods in office of District Governor Jørgen Friis, 1651–1661, and Regional Governor Christopher Orning, 1661–1665, severe witchcraft persecution took place.

In Norway the arena of a witchcraft trial was the courtroom. Still, the role of the church might be traced in the witchcraft documents. The Reformation took place in Denmark in 1536 and in Norway in 1537. No doubt ideas of the leading Danish theologians were known in Finnmark at the time, representing an understanding of witchcraft where the Devil as a mighty and fear-provoking figure was in the centre. Even if the church was not directly active in initiating the witch-hunt in Finnmark, ministers played a part during the witchcraft trials. Their functions were twofold: participation during interrogation of suspected persons and preparation of the sentenced persons for death.

Both women and men were accused of being witches during the European witch-hunt. In Finnmark, 111 women and 24 men were prosecuted for practising witchcraft. We find similar gender distributions, around four-fifths of the accused being women and one-fifth being men, in many parts of Europe. However, in a few countries, for instance Iceland, Finland and Estonia, more than 50% of those accused of witchcraft, were men. Of the 91 people executed in Finnmark, there were 77 women and 14 men. We find little data about age in the sources, but about two-thirds of the women executed were married. Every one out of five of the executed women was or had been a maidservant. Many of these women had moved to Finnmark from coastal areas further to the south. At the time of persecution, most of them lived in Vardø or Vadsø or these fishing villages' immediate surroundings. The Finnmark witchcraft trials were strongly connected to East Finnmark, and Vardøhus Castle played an important part in the trials. Suspected women were kept

incarcerated there in the so-called “witches' hole”, a room at the Castle where women suspected to be witches were imprisoned for shorter or longer periods of time. Use of torture was common during the Finnmark witchcraft trials, even if the use of torture was illegal before sentence was passed. After sentence torture was permitted, in order to provide names of accomplices. The severest torture was carried out at the Castle. There is documentation in the Finnmark witchcraft documents that at least two persons were tortured to death before sentence was passed. Two-thirds of all the sentences to the stake were passed at the Castle. Only two of these sentences applied to men, so the target of the trials held at Vardøhus clearly was women.

As witchcraft was a crime impossible to prove, circumstantial evidence was used to press forth confessions. The outcome of the water ordeal was often used as evidence, as it was held to be God's judgment. The procedure consisted of throwing the accused person into the sea with his or her hands and feet tied. Water, which was considered a sacred element, was thought to repel evil, so the suspect's rising to the surface and floating was an indication of guilt. Sinking was a sign of innocence. The water ordeal was not defined as torture by the judicial authorities. Fifty per cent of the water ordeals during the Finnmark witchcraft trials were carried out in Vardø. One-third of all who were executed in connection with the witchcraft trials in Finnmark, but only two of the men, were subjected to the water ordeal, and every one of them floated.

Norwegians and Samis lived side by side in seventeenth-century Finnmark, and both ethnic groups suffered from the ongoing persecution of witches. Approximately four out of every five persons accused of practising witchcraft in Finnmark were Norwegians. The others were Samis. The worst hit group during the witch-hunt was that of Norwegian women. Out of all the accused women, nine out of ten were Norwegian. When looking at women as a group, most of those sentenced to the stake in Finnmark were Norwegian.

A different picture applies to men: Out of 24 accused men, 16 were Samis, and as many as 13 of them lost their lives. The fact that Samis were relatively numerous among executed men, as compared to Sami women among executed women, may be explained by the fact that Sami men were reputed throughout Europe, for instance through descriptions in history books, to be well versed in magic and sorcery. They were allegedly able to provide sailing winds and good speed, and for using the rune drum. Their practice was an individual practice of traditional forms of witchcraft. Early in the seventeenth century, the Samis in the north were subject to particular scrutiny in connection with the witchcraft trials, as may be understood from a letter sent by King Christian IV in 1609 to the District Governors in the two northernmost districts of Norway. In this letter, it is stated that those who were practising Sami sorcery should be persecuted without mercy. Sami sorcery appears to have played a part primarily in the first phase of the witch hunt in Finnmark. The death sentences related to Sami men were all passed before 1640. However, also during the last

phase of the Finnmark witchcraft trials, a few Sami persons were accused of practising witchcraft, without receiving death sentences. A Sami shaman was accused of using the rune drum in 1692, and his case was sent to central authorities in Copenhagen for final decision. However, he was killed with an axe while in legal custody, before his case had been dealt with in Copenhagen.

The Finnmark witchcraft trials were intense, not only in terms of the total number of death sentences, but also because we see clusters of trials lasting for short periods of time. Most of the death sentences were passed in linked trials, so-called panics, meaning that one trial led to another in rapid succession. In Finnmark, the panics only involved women. A characteristic of these trials was that the accused woman confessed that she had forsworn God in heaven and her baptismal pact, and that she had entered into a pact with the Devil. By means of such a pact she obtained powers to carry out evil deeds. Another characteristic was that the accused person confessed she had attended witches' gatherings where the Devil was present. Finally, she confessed that together with other witches, she had cast fatal spells, or spells that caused disease, on people and livestock, and that she had raised storms, sunk ships and driven the fish away from the shore. As a result of such a confession, other persons were suspected of practising witchcraft, persons who subsequently were summoned to the court and interrogated. The main three panics in Finnmark took place in 1620–1621, 1652–1653, and 1662–1663. The majority of death sentences were passed in panics. Not only adults were exposed to the witch hunt: In the course of the last panic, six little girls were also brought before the court, accused of witchcraft. However, they were all acquitted.

The court's verdict hinged on what the accused told the court. Confessing to a pact with the Devil was considered to be very serious, and tantamount to signing one's own death warrant. As in many other European countries, there was a marked element of such confessions in the Finnmark witchcraft trials. Underlying the emphasis on confessions about pacts with the Devil was a European scholarly doctrine, demonology. Its aim was basically to identify the Devil's secret accomplices on earth, and to this end its teachings centred around the means to recognise them and to learn what they could accomplish. All over Europe, a number of books laying out the tenets of demonology were published from the second half of the fifteenth through the first half of the sixteenth centuries. The ideas of these books became well-known among Europe's learned elite.

In Denmark-Norway, these ideas had an impact on legislation and church affairs. As a result of the Crown's active involvement in State affairs, the ideas spread to all parts of the realm. In 1617, King Christian IV issued a decree whereby a witch was defined as one who was bonded to the Devil or who consorted with him. However, it was only in the northernmost district of the kingdom that these ideas came to influence the development of witchcraft trials. Ideas about pacts with the Devil, witches' covens and collective witchcraft operations became pivotal in the confessions made by persons accused in the Finnmark trials. The collective aspect, which was implicit in the confessions,

led to the swift accusation of numerous people within a brief span of time, people who were, in turn, brought before the court, accused of witchcraft, interrogated, convicted, sentenced to loss of life at the stake and, finally, burnt.

The local courts played an important part, in that they launched prosecutions and made the trials continue. The law was upheld by officials who were terrified of what witches might do, with the Devil's help. Hence, the subjective element of official intervention might have been decisive when a legal process was launched in a community. The Church preached fear of Satan, dwelling upon his appearance and highlighting his powers. We should not forget that at the time, in the seventeenth century, oral transmission was still virtually the rule in Finnmark. All information from the local courts and about the ministers' sermons was recounted among the locals. Thus, the tales about the Devil and his pact were retold time and time again in the local villages, and they resurfaced as confessions in the courts.

From the court records of the Finnmark witchcraft trials, we see how arbitrary decisions, pressure under interrogation, and use of torture forced accused persons to confess having practised witchcraft. Such confessions led to the stake. Those sentenced to death for having practised witchcraft were burnt alive, tied to a ladder. Judicial practice at the local courts, far from central authorities in Copenhagen, is part of the explanation of the severity of the Finnmark witchcraft trials. Also demonology as an ideological construction must be considered among the explanatory factors. From the Finnmark sources, a correlation between local courts, a majority of women accused of witchcraft, confession of the Devil's pact, torture, and a high execution rate can be observed for the middle period of the witch-hunt. In addition, the idea that Sami men were well versed in sorcery might be considered as part of the explanation for the beginning and the end of the Finnmark witchcraft trials.

The strong fear of witches, influencing state and church, gradually was reduced during the latter part of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century. A new way of thinking took over, questioning witchcraft as an alleged crime. As a result of this, the European witchcraft trials as a historical phenomenon came to an end.