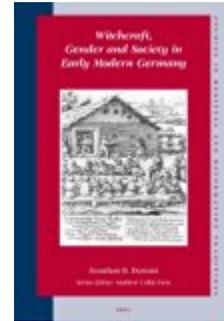


# H-Net Reviews

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Jonathan B. Durrant. *Witchcraft, Gender and Society in Early Modern Germany*. Boston: Brill, 2007. xxvii + 288 pp. \$112.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-16093-4.

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## Explaining Early Modern Witch Persecution: The Eichstätt Witch-Hunts

Despite its title, this book is, in fact, a meticulous study of the witch-hunts that occurred in the prince-bishopric of Eichstätt in Franconia. Jonathan B. Durrant establishes that there were three phases of significant witch persecution in the prince-bishopric in the early modern period. The first occurred between 1590 and 1592, when at least nineteen and perhaps as many as twenty-six women from the outlying administrative districts of Spalt and Abenberg were executed as alleged witches. Trials began again in 1603, this time in the town of Eichstätt, and cost the lives of twenty women. The third phase of persecution, which was again concentrated mainly in the town of Eichstätt, began in 1617 and lasted until 1631: this phase forms the main focus of the book because source survival from the two earlier phases is poor. Of the 182 people arrested during this third phase of witch trials in Eichstätt, 175 were executed and a further 4 died in the course of the judicial process, giving a grim overall death rate of over 98 percent. Durrant estimates that between 217 and 256 people were executed for witchcraft in Eichstätt during these three phases of persecution. Most of the witch-suspects came from families well integrated into the political and social fabric of the prince-bishopric and its capital, with a high proportion coming from the political craft elites of the town of Eichstätt. The majority (80 to 85 percent) of those arrested and executed were female, a gender profile that Durrant attributes mainly to the influence that specially appointed witch commissioners, who “could not easily imagine men as witches,” had on the Eichstätt witch-hunts as a whole (p. 84).

Durrant’s estimate of the total number of executions is lower than the figures of 274 and even 400 suggested by previous scholars, but he is right to point out that the Eichstätt persecution still constituted “a relatively intense witch-hunt,” given the sparse population of the area (p. 3). The town of Eichstätt had only around 4,500 inhabitants at the time. A detailed study of the Eichstätt witch trials has not been attempted before, partly because of the territorial complexity of the prince-bishopric (helpfully summarized in the map on p. 8), and partly because the key legal records of the witch trials (the interrogation transcripts) have survived only fragmentarily. Durrant is thus to be highly commended for taking on this daunting task and for making an invaluable contribution to our overall understanding of the regional variation in witch persecution across early modern Germany. In terms of comparative analysis, the witch persecution experienced in the Prince-bishopric of Eichstätt can be categorized as an example of the excessive persecution, “without regard for political, social or humanitarian obstacles,” that Wolfgang Behringer has identified as typical for the Catholic ecclesiastical territories of Franconia in the early part of the seventeenth century.[1]

Durrant argues convincingly that the explanation for the scale and severity of the Eichstätt witch trials was not to be found in a popular desire or popular pressure for persecution, emanating as one might perhaps have expected from popular panic about malevolent witchcraft or from situations of social conflict within the community. On the contrary, a striking feature of the Eichstätt trials was that there were very few accusations of

witchcraft from below: in other words, from peasants or townspeople who believed themselves to be the victims of specific acts of harmful magic. Instead, “the vast majority of the Eichstätt witch-suspects were denounced by other witches under interrogation and convicted on the basis of their own confessions produced under torture” (p. xviii). The trials thus escalated according to their own internal dynamic and from the top down, reaching their peak under the leadership of Johann Christoph von Westerstetten, the prince-bishop of Eichstätt from 1613 to 1637, and the witch commissioners he appointed at some point between 1613 and 1617 specifically to root out what he regarded as an evil, heretical sect of witches. Like other arch hunters of witches among the Franconian bishops, Westerstetten had been educated by Jesuits and was a staunch supporter of the Jesuits as well as an aggressive proponent of Counter-Reformation Catholicism. He was appointed a canon in the cathedral chapter in Eichstätt at the age of twenty-four in 1589, but left Eichstätt to become prince-provost (and to hunt witches) in Ellwangen in 1603, before returning to Eichstätt as prince-bishop in 1613.

Although conclusive evidence is lacking, Durrant constructs a plausible hypothesis linking the stop-start pattern of witch persecution in Eichstätt in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries to probable factional conflict between groups of clerics within the cathedral chapter in Eichstätt. In this context, Westerstetten seems to have been linked consistently with a pro-Jesuit, pro-Counter-Reformation, pro-witch-hunting grouping that finally won the day when he became bishop; the integration of the Jesuits into the religious life of Eichstätt, the appointment of witch commissioners, and an “aggressive policy of recatholicization” duly followed (p. 9). The persecution of witches was presumably envisaged by Westerstetten, the witch commissioners, and their clerical allies as part of this missionary endeavor, although (as Durrant acknowledges) frustratingly little is known currently about the witch commissioners, despite the hugely significant part they played in the persecution. The main concerns of the interrogatory of 1617, a list of eighty-four points drawn up to help the commissioners in their questioning of suspects and reproduced by Durrant (appendix 1), were with witchcraft as heresy (rather than harmful magic) and with the moral and sexual probity of the suspects; in other words, with their alleged deviance from the high spiritual and sexual standards expected of the good Catholic. Thus, while Durrant points out that there was no discernible political, economic, or religious faction among the political or craft elites in Eichstätt that

might have fuelled the witch-hunts, he at least implies that clerical in-fighting played a role in instigating them.

The main part of the book consists of thematic chapters based on close analysis of confession narratives from about ninety of the trials from the third phase of persecution for which adequate documentation survives. These confessions were clearly produced under extreme duress; indeed, one of the drawbacks of organizing the material in these chapters thematically (rather than following each trial through in chronological order, in the way that Durrant discusses the trial of Margretha Bittelmayr in chapter 2) is that the reader perhaps loses sight of the physical and psychological suffering of the suspects as their confessions were shaped by excessive torture and leading questions. However, Durrant argues convincingly that the confessions and denunciations produced by the suspects “were the products of their own imaginations and their diabolizations of ordinary experiences of village or small-town life” (p. xx). This was because it was much easier for suspects to diabolize familiar situations than it was for them to invent entirely fictional scenarios, especially when they had to sustain a consistent and plausible confession over several sessions of interrogation. In chapter 3, Durrant uses the names of the people that suspects were forced to denounce as fellow Sabbath-attendees, in conjunction with other sources, such as baptismal and marriage registers, both to reconstruct the networks of association in which the suspects situated themselves and to explore, where possible, the quality of the social relationships within these networks. Durrant shows that the confessions generally reflected positive social relationships, rather than relationships grounded in enmity or conflict, and that suspects tended to draw on those linked to them in positive ways (by the ties of family, god-parentage, neighborliness, or work) to people their imaginary Sabbaths. He concludes that, far from constituting evidence of a community marked by social tension, “one should regard the lists of denunciations produced under interrogation as indicators of social cohesion” (p. 69).

In chapters 4, 5, and 6, Durrant draws on the work of historical-anthropologist David Sabean to identify and explore what Sabean calls “‘relational idioms,’” the key objects and processes by means of which individuals structured and made sense of their social relationships (pp. 90-93). The three key relational idioms Durrant identifies from the Eichstätt confessions are food and drink, sex, and health. Eating and drinking with other people, for example, emerged from the confessions of the witch-suspects not just as “significant social activities by

which neighbourhood, friendship and other, more formal, associations were confirmed and maintained,” but also as “a means by which the quality of the relationship in question, as it was perceived by one person at least, was expressed clearly to others” (pp. 113-114). Eating together was, in other words, about social intimacy and integration. In these chapters, Durrant reads the confession narratives against the grain and paints a vivid picture of men and women who seem to have enjoyed such convivial gatherings as wedding feasts and other celebrations, and who might even have indulged in same-sex relations and pre- and extramarital sex, or tried to procure abortions. The thread that runs through these chapters is that of a clash between what Durrant calls the “secular pragmatism” of the suspects and the “strident religiosity” of the witch commissioners and Jesuits, which was being played out through the witch persecution (p. 184). Chapter 7 is a disturbing account of the sexual abuse by prison guards in Eichstätt of female suspects, who were either desperate to become pregnant and thereby delay their execution, or who had nothing else in custody apart from their bodies to trade for sustenance and protection from other warders. This abuse came to light in Eichstätt because it was investigated formally by the witch commissioners: one wonders how often it went undetected elsewhere. This chapter will be grist to the mill for feminists who interpret the early modern witch-hunts as an example of the physical and sexual abuse of women. It is also a stark reminder, coming as it does after earlier chapters in which Durrant has suggested that the confession narratives “reveal a dynamic rather than passively gendered society,” that women suffered far more than men during the witch-hunts in Eichstätt; they made up the majority of those arrested and executed and were subjected to worse treatment in custody (p. xxv).

Durrant is right to insist that large-scale witch panics, such as the one experienced in Eichstätt, have a different dynamic from individual trials or small-scale episodes of witch persecution, and one that is by no means necessarily rooted primarily in social conflict between neighbors. His work is also an excellent example of how confession narratives can be used with sensitivity and imagination to tell us about more than simply the process of persecution. In his eagerness to move away from social-conflict models of explanation of witchcraft accusations, however, Durrant overexaggerates the degree to which other historians of witchcraft rely on them, and

underemphasizes the extent to which the witch-hunts in Eichstätt were an expression of (and perhaps contributor to) religious tensions in the Prince-bishopric between an older, less severe form of Catholicism and a new, zealous, Counter-Reformation Catholicism. I would also have liked to know more about the level of social cohesion in the town after the witch persecution, although this is probably a whole new piece of research! The Eichstätt trials saw a high proportion of people of relatively good social standing tortured and executed; the level of trauma suffered by individual suspects, who were forced to denounce friends and relatives and thereby sentence them to almost certain death and who submitted to sexual abuse in their desperation to escape execution, is almost unimaginable. What were the longer-term consequences of this for the marriage prospects and political and social standing of their families? Was there any criticism of or backlash against the witch-hunters in later years? How were the social networks within the town affected by the trials and their aftermath? Finally, while the large-scale witch-hunts that occurred in the other ecclesiastical territories of Franconia provide the obvious point of comparison for Eichstätt, Durrant could also have made useful comparisons with the late sixteenth-century hunts in the city of Trier and the imperial Abbey of Saint Maximin, especially as the demonology written by Peter Binsfeld on the Trier hunts seems to have been one of the key influences on Westerstetten and other south German witch-hunters. Rita Voltmer’s increasingly large body of work on the witch-hunts in these areas shows some interesting parallels with Eichstätt; for example, the Jesuits were also conspicuously active in promoting the hunts in Trier.[2] Despite these minor criticisms, however, overall Durrant has produced a richly detailed book that makes an important contribution to the historiography of witch-hunting in early modern Germany.

#### Notes

[1]. Wolfgang Behringer, *Witchcraft Persecutions in Bavaria: Popular Magic, Religious Zealotry and Reason of State in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 228.

[2]. See, for example, Rita Voltmer, “Zwischen Herrschaftskrise, Wirtschaftsdepression und Jesuitenpropaganda: Hexenverfolgungen in der Stadt Trier (15.-17. Jahrhundert),” *Jahrbuch für westdeutsche Landesgeschichte* 27 (2001): 37-107.

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