

# H-Net Reviews

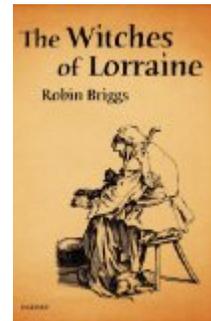
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robin Briggs. *The Witches of Lorraine*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. xii + 404 pp. \$150.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-822582-9.

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Commissioned by Tryntje Helfferich



## Returning to the Scene of the Crime

In this instance, both the author and the reviewer are returning to the scene of the crime. The crime, of course, is witchcraft. The scene is the Duchy of Lorraine, a buffer state between France and the German Empire, with legal ties to both. And the evidence is abundant. We know the names and locations of almost 1,500 women and men put on trial for this crime in Lorraine, nearly all of them between 1570 and 1630. About 80 percent were sentenced to death and executed. Moreover, transcripts of more than 375 of these trials have been preserved among the duchy's fiscal records.

Both author and reviewer are senior scholars trying to extract useful historical knowledge from this pile of information, but with different goals and proceeding from different starting points. Robin Briggs used Lorraine's witch trials extensively in arguing the central thesis of a well-received book entitled *Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (1996; 2d ed. 2002). Afterward, I decided to mine the fiscal evidence about Lorraine's witch trials to illuminate the duchy's seldom-studied political history in a small book entitled *A Bewitched Duchy: Lorraine and Its Dukes, 1477-1736* (2007). What began on my part as rivalry evolved into collaboration, certainly a healthier and more useful tactic for senior members of the Republic of Letters, after we served together in 2003 on a French doctoral jury for the best young expert on this subject, Maryse Simon, whose regional study of an Alsatian mining valley has since appeared as *Les affaires de sorcellerie dans le Val de Lièpvre* (2006), with a preface by Briggs.

Briggs has now "returned to the scene of the crime" by arranging his evidence from Lorraine's witch trials as central rather than illustrative material for a monograph that reprises many arguments from *Witches and Neighbors*. He organizes his material into three parts: a contextual framework (chapters 1-3) outlining Lorraine's geographical and political background), followed by four chapters illustrating the dynamics and key features of individual trials, before concluding with case studies of Lorraine's two most heavily afflicted districts and two special themes, urban and male witchcraft.

My modest input about Lorraine trials known only from treasury reports is incorporated into his first section. However, Briggs was unable to use my recent survey, "Fiscal Sources and Witch Trials in Lorraine" published in *Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft* (2007), to supplement some of his presentations in chapter 2 (for example, table 2.2 on p. 54) and to provide a clearer comparative focus on witch trials both in the duchy of Bar to the west (ruled by the dukes of Lorraine but administered separately) and in some German-speaking districts of northeastern Lorraine. After 1571, the former had compulsory appeals to two different courts and exhibited a much lower incidence of witch trials and executions than Lorraine proper, while the latter recorded a few "micro-hunts" of exceptional severity, the worst of which terrorized the easternmost tip of their lands, the winegrowing village of St. Hippolyte on the Alsatian plain.

Such quibbles do not affect the basic merits of Briggs's account. Unsurprisingly, its major message closely resembles that of *Witches and Neighbors*, viewing witchcraft as a normal component of village life in early modern Europe. Even in Lorraine, court trials constituted exceptions to a general pattern of negotiations involving threats and accommodations stretching over several years; the evidence presented usually dated back twelve years or more. Moreover, in most of Lorraine's villages, the majority of people with some reputation as witches were never put on trial.

Once some combination of local circumstances had triggered a witch trial, its outcome was affected by the unusual degree of autonomy enjoyed by Lorraine's local courts. After 1570, these were required to consult Lorraine's highest tribunal, the Change of Nancy, before employing torture or carrying out death sentences against suspected witches, but they were not required to follow its advice; Briggs found that they did so about half the time. Trial evidence about the effects of torture contains a few surprises: half of an early sample resisted it successfully; afterward, there was no significant difference between men and women about its effectiveness, with over three-quarters confessing; and "none died from the direct effects of torture" (p. 77).

At the same time, as Briggs notes, there was a complete absence of skepticism about the reality of the crime among Lorraine's ruling classes, from the dukes themselves down to their lowest-ranking officials. Even Lorraine's only local baroque saint (whose voice was once drowned out by demonically possessed parishioners in his parish church) agreed that witchcraft must be punished with maximum severity. After 1627, his own parish became the epicenter of Lorraine's largest witch-hunt, which lasted until the French occupied Lorraine in the early 1630s and abruptly ended what their judges considered a "superstitious" tradition.

Briggs's next section uses a succession of close readings narrating individual cases, loosely organized around such themes as clearly fantastic elements (e.g., werewolves or Sabbats), the gradual creation of reputations for practicing witchcraft, and the intricate dynamics between inflicting supernatural harm and healing one's bewitched victims. The most serious flaw in this part is a

shortage of comparable trial narratives from Lorraine's sizable German-speaking population, which held significantly larger witches' Sabbats (median attendance seems to have been at least twice that in French-speaking Lorraine) and created some lurid fantasies about witchcraft (e.g., cooking babies or Black Masses) that never crossed Lorraine's language frontier.

Chapters 8 and 9 include some excellent vignettes of small districts where recorded witch trials survive most extensively: I found his discussion of the possessions of the abbot of Etival especially valuable. His penultimate chapter features a detailed investigation of witch trials in Lorraine's second largest town, St. Nicolas de Port. Here, trials were unusually likely to be preserved (fifteen of nineteen) and defendants were almost exclusively women (eighteen of nineteen), most of whom were semiprofessional magical healers; however, their punishments seem less severe than usual in Lorraine, since half escaped execution. His final chapter provides a contrast by analyzing trials against Lorraine's male witches, who comprise almost 30 percent of his sample. Here, Briggs offers nuanced corrections to hasty stereotypes about a "dark corner" of witchcraft studies: herdsmen did form a distinctive subgroup (fourteen cases) and husbands were sometimes accused with wives (twelve cases); but the largest group (over 40 percent) of these men had other close kin, parents or siblings, who had also been accused of practicing witchcraft. And scattered evidence suggests that several men accused of witchcraft were significantly wealthier than their accusers, something that rarely applies to their female counterparts.

Among the most admirable features of this book is its scholarly apparatus. Briggs uses conventional footnotes, but supplements them with detailed abstracts in English for each of these 377 trials, all of which, plus other "material that had to be excluded from the book to keep it within a sensible length," are available on his Web site [www.history.ox.ac.uk/staff/robinbriggs](http://www.history.ox.ac.uk/staff/robinbriggs) (p. 388). One can only applaud this tactic; and I pledge to send him some further information from fiscal records for Germanophone Lorraine to improve his database even further. In matters of witchcraft, expert witnesses must either hang together or undergo cross-examination separately.

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