This is a major, groundbreaking study by a leading scholar of continental witchcraft studies, now made available to an English-speaking audience for the first time.

Based on an intensive search through central and local legal records for southeastern Germany, an area extending well beyond but including present-day Bavaria, the author has compiled a thorough overview of all known prosecutions for witchcraft in the period 1300–1800. He shows conclusively that witch-hunting was not a constant or uniform phenomenon, and that three-quarters of all known executions for witchcraft were concentrated in the years 1586–1630, years of particular dearth and famine. The book investigates the social and political implications of witchcraft, and how the mechanisms of persecution served as a rallying cry for partisan factionalism at court. The author also explores the mentalities behind witch-hunting, emphasising the complex religious debates between believers and sceptics, and Catholics and Protestants.
Past and Present Publications

Witchcraft Persecutions in Bavaria
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Witchcraft Persecutions in Bavaria

Popular magic, religious zealotry and reason of state in early modern Europe

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# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of illustrations</th>
<th>page ix</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of tables</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface and acknowledgements</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of abbreviations</td>
<td>xvii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Introduction  
Witch trials in historiographic context  
Investigating witch trials and learned discourse in southeastern Germany  
Methodology  
17  
29

2 Moving toward a social history of witchcraft  
Quantification in synchronic and diachronic juxtaposition  
Witch trials and popular magic  
A 'crisis of the late sixteenth century'?
34  
35  
65  
89

3 The wave of persecutions around 1590  
Contemporary interpretations  
The course of the persecutions  
Triggering factors  
Mechanisms of persecution  
The breakdown of consensus  
Regulatory efforts at the end of the persecutions  
115  
115  
121  
158  
183  
194  
206

4 The struggle for restraint, 1600–30  
The witch craze at its peak  
The Protestant solution  
The Catholic stance hardens  
Formation of an opposition party in Bavaria  
Learned debate, 1601–4  
212  
212  
213  
216  
230  
247
viii Contents

Conflict over the mandate against superstition and witchcraft of 1612 269
Predominance of the moderates in Bavaria 291
Triumph of the moderates in southern Germany 310

5 Perpetuation through domestication 1630–1775 322
Convergence of trial procedure 322
Novel polarities and structural changes of trials 331
The last executions for witchcraft 1749–75 344

6 The final Catholic debate 355
From Tanner to Spee 355
The onset of Catholic debate 357
Public debate and the victory of the Enlightenment, 1766–70 359
Combating superstition after the ‘witchcraft war’ 381

7 Conclusions 388
Witchcraft trials and learned discourse in southeastern Germany: a summary 388
Structures and regions in comparison 400
Witch trials and social crises 405

8 Sources and literature 416
Sources 416
Literature 425

Index 457
Illustrations

PLATES
1 Valentin, *End-Urthel* [...], Augsburg 1760  page 40
2 Stealing milk by sorcery, from Hans Vintler, *Tugendspiegel*, Augsburg 1486  69
3 Deeds of the witches, from Ulrich Tengler, *Der neu Layenspiegel*, Augsburg 1511  75
4 White and black magic, from Cicero, *De Officiis*, Augsburg 1531  93
5 The *Erwytterde Unholden Zeyttung*, 1590  120
6 The witch in the Dance of Death at Füssen, Füssen 1602  127
7 Peter Binsfeld, *Tractat vom Bekanntsuss der Zauberer und Hexen*, Munich 1592  141
8 *Kurze Erzählung und Fürbildung der übelthatten* [...], Augsburg 1600  231
9 Martin Delrio, *Disquisitionum Magicarum libri sex*, Cologne 1657  264
10 *Landtgebott wider die Aberglauben, Zauberey, Hexerey und andere sträffliche Teufelskünst*, Munich 1611  284
11 The *Druten Zeitung Schmalkalden*, Nuremberg 1627  302
12 *Warhaffte Historische Abbild: und kurze Beschreibung*, Augsburg 1654  329
13 *Warhaffte Beschreibung des Urthels* [...], Augsburg 1666  332
14 *Relation oder Beschreibung* [...], Augsburg 1669  335
15 Peasant magic: charms against bewitchment of the cattle  383
16 Gassner's *Weise wider den Teufel zu streiten*, Kempten 1774  383
17 Adam Tanner, *Theologia Scholastica*, Tomus 3, Ingolstadt 1627  396

FIGURES
1 Court proceedings against sorcery and/or witchcraft in Augsburg, in five-yearly periods, 1581–1653  45
2 Witch trials and executions of witches in the Duchy of Bavaria
Illustrations

1. Every full decade, 1590–1750 51
2. Number of county courts in the provincial administration of Munich with trials for sorcery and witchcraft 52

MAPS

Map 1 Executions of witches around 1590: geographical distribution in southeastern Germany xviii
Map 2 Executions of witches in southeast Germany xx
Map 3 Comparison of witch hunts in three south German regions (southwestern Germany, Franconia, southeastern Germany) xxii
## Tables

1. Geographical distribution of witch trials, based on the material of the *H-Sonderkommando*  
   page 37
2. Court proceedings against sorcery and/or witchcraft in Augsburg, in five-yearly periods, 1581–1653  
   44
3. Court proceedings against sorcery and/or witchcraft in the Bishopric of Augsburg in five-yearly periods, 1573–1632  
   47
4. Decline in the importance of witchcraft after 1630 as reflected in the minutes of the Court Council at Munich  
   53
5. Statistical analysis of 103 witch trials held in Bavaria between 1608 and 1616  
   54
6. Witch hunts with more than twenty victims  
   61
7. Witch hunts with ten to nineteen victims  
   61
8. Witch hunts with four to nine victims  
   62
9. Chronological and quantitative distribution of minor and major witch hunts  
   63
10. Relationship between type of trial and number of victims  
    63
11. Trials and executions of witches in Bavarian county courts (1608–16), based on analysis of the minutes of the Court Council at Munich  
    291
12. Trials and executions of witches in Bavarian county courts (1629–31) based on analysis of the minutes of the Court Council at Munich  
    308
13. Intensity of witch hunting in four neighbouring regions of southeastern Germany and Austria  
    401
Preface

Witchcraft persecutions in Bavaria – isn’t there already a monograph on the subject, and a noteworthy one at that? Even today, Sigmund Riezler’s highly recommendable _History of Witch-Trials in Bavaria_ (Munich, 1896) makes for good reading, and, like Burckhardt’s _Culture of the Renaissance in Italy_, or Huizinga’s _Waning of the Middle Ages_, is now a literary classic: its findings may be dated, but its powerful prose, scholarly facility and breadth of presentation never fail to stimulate. Nowadays, what established historian would dare to open their scholarly portrayal with anticlerical polemics and, after a radical critique of a colleague (Ranke!), culminate in a plea against his ‘cold, earnest’ narrative, arguing instead for one which ‘allows emotions to have their say as well’? To act as if one held no opinions, Riezler added, was the mere affectation of modesty. Yet much of this sounds remarkably modern indeed, and reminds us of similar debates in recent years . . .

However, this study does not simply continue where Riezler left off. International research has made great strides and, above all, has refined its methods in the past two decades. Furthermore, our own historical situation and, consequently, our cognisant interests changed dramatically. Riezler and his contemporaries lived in the certainty that horrors like witchcraft persecutions could never recur on German soil. If we now know better, then hardly as a consequence of laudable achievements, but subsequent events have inextricably altered our perspectives. Together with Macfarlane and with ethnologists, we have learned to appreciate the social function of witchcraft accusations, and Midelfort has taught us to take contemporary discourse much more seriously. A lofty disdain for seemingly distant modes of thought is no longer tenable.

In my own considered opinion, it is only too comfortable for us to apply ‘modern’ criteria in judgement of witchcraft. After all, one has to consider the major differences between present social and mental structures and those of the distant past. At its core, the contingency of witchcraft re-
Preface

maintained a basic conviction during the later Middle Ages and the early modern period. If witchcraft was plausible, then it was logically consistent to threaten its misuse with punishment. Furthermore, evidence of witchcraft was always extremely difficult to obtain because, unlike other ‘weapons’, it was intangible and hidden. Beyond that, the source of witchcraft’s power and its actual capabilities were hotly debated issues that forced human understanding to its limits. The demonological literature of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, so obscure to us now, found a wide audience. It is no coincidence that leading intellectuals of the time, including many we might hardly suspect, occupied themselves with it; even sceptical philosophers like Montaigne, Descartes, Althusius, Hobbes and Thomasius cogitated on the problem. For common people, jurists, theologians, town magistrates and local governments, witchcraft was an everyday, though hardly a routine matter. ‘Human blood is not calves’ blood’, as one seventeenth-century jurist at the University of Dillingen put it. Because witch-hunting posed enormous theoretical problems and (owing to the apparently imminent danger) practical urgency, it is central to the history of early modern Europe. Witchcraft-beliefs evoked bitter debates, since three essential, early-modern ‘world-views’ collided on that very point; a traditional folk-culture of magical beliefs, a new, fanatical, religious zealotry stemming from the Reformation/Counter-Reformation, and an equally new secular rationalism, an early modern reason of state. Certainly, neither a conflict between ideological and pragmatic reasoning nor a confrontation with unfamiliar modes of thought is novel. Sometimes we might even recognise historical parallels.

The following regional comparison focuses on the former Duchy of Bavaria, its neighbours in eastern Swabia, southern portions of present-day Central Franconia and the Upper Palatinate, a region defined here as ‘southeastern Germany’. Its witches did not fly to the Blockberg (Franconia and central Germany) or the Heuberg (southwestern Germany). Neither were they called Hexen, Zauberer (sorcerers) nor, as in northern Franconia, Trutten, but rather Unholden. Their persecution began relatively late, but Bavaria eventually developed the most comprehensive witchcraft-legislation in Europe. And, as we will presently see, this region was peculiar in many other respects; but how could it be otherwise?

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Preface  xv

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Wolfgang Behringer
Munich, 1995
Abbreviations

ADB  Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie
Cgm.  Codex germanicus monacensis, Staatsbibliothek Munich
GR  Generalregistratur
HDA  Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens
Hist. Ver.  Historischer Verein
HStAM  Hauptstaatsarchiv München
HZ  Historische Zeitschrift
KHR  Kurbayern Hofrat
NDB  Neue Deutsche Biographie
OA  Oberbayerisches Archiv
ÖNB  Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna
RP  Ratsprotokolle
SBM  Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich
SHB  Soldan/Heppe/Bauer
StA  Staatsarchiv
StadtA  Stadtarchiv
UA  Urgichtenakten
UBM  Universitätsbibliothek, Munich
Urk.  Urkunde
ZA  Zulassungsarbeit
ZBLG  Zeitschrift für bayrische Landesgeschichte
Zs.  Zeitschrift
ZWLG  Zeitschrift für württembergische Landesgeschichte
1. Executions of witches around 1590
2. Executions of witches in southeast Germany, 1400–1800
3. Witchcraft persecutions in comparison: three south German regions