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978-0-521-43186-6 - The Village in Court: Arson, Infanticide, and Poaching in the Court Records of Upper Bavaria, 1848-1910

Regina Schulte

Frontmatter

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The Village in Court

The rural village in nineteenth-century Europe was caught in conflict between its traditional local culture and its new integration into the grasp of state institutions and modern social structures. Local practices were turned into crimes; the social meaning of crime within the village culture was redefined by the new standards of bourgeois penal laws and psychiatry. The language of the intruding agencies has structured, by a wealth of written documentation, the image of village life for the outside world. Criminal investigations, however, had to be based on interrogations of the villagers themselves. It is through this record of a traditional oral culture that the villagers' own views, language, and symbolic gestures have been preserved. This book uses an analytical approach informed by social history, folklore and gender studies, anthropology, criminology, and psychoanalysis to reconstruct the cultural implications of these documents, which originated from the very moment when traditional village culture was being called into question. Based on archival records of prosecutions of the three most important rural types of crime before the penal courts of Upper Bavaria in the late nineteenth century – arson, infanticide, and poaching – this study in historical anthropology reveals the fabric of the village society: its norms, conflicts, and hidden meanings. Concentrating on the individual in conflict within the household economy and the local community, it gives a new and original interpretation of power structures, gender relations, and generational rites of passage within the village.

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Translated by Barrie Selman

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[More information](#)


Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>vii</i>
Introduction: The breakup of the village	I
The peasant as seen by the middle class	I
The literature on rural conditions	6
Crime as a medium of historical anthropology	10
Landscape with villages	17
PART I. PEASANT SOCIETY AND THE INDIVIDUAL	
1. Fire in the village	25
The arsonists	26
Socioeconomic origins	26
The quest for motives	26
Work	27
Master and servant	27
Day labor	31
The village	34
Suspicion	35
The relationship with work and property	37
The outsiders	38
The inn	41
The families	42
Belonging to a family	43
The law of inheritance	45
Cain and Abel	46
The generations	49
The marriages	51
The hearth and the fire	54
2. The mad-doctor's gaze	58
From social symptom to physical symptom	61
Female arsonists and puberty	68
Catharsis or disease?	73

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Regina Schulte

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Contents*

PART II. THE STATUS OF WOMEN AND THE PLACE OF CHILDREN

3. The Bridal Wagon	79
4. Silent births	83
Women who committed infanticide	83
The time spent as a maid	86
Moving and belonging	86
Work	88
Wages	91
The dowry	92
Love affairs between unmarried farm servants	93
Relationships	94
Illegitimate children	97
“With the angels”	101
Work and childbirth	101
“Something came out” – or the vagueness of the body’s messages	104
The search for motivation	107
The love of children	109
Talk	111

PART III. THE DISPUTED BOUNDARIES OF THE VILLAGE

5. Poaching: Economics, culture, and sexuality	121
“Nothing but shoot game”	124
A trade on the edge of the villages	127
The village goes poaching	130
The poor	132
Farmers and farmhands	134
A topsy-turvy world	139
The families	140
The young men	142
Passion	144
“Shooting a hind” – and the meaning of the words	147
The reality of fantasy	150
“The chamois in the mountains”	153
Laments and curses	166
Bavarian Hiasl	172
6. Domination in jeopardy	178
The events	178
The provincial judge attempts to mediate	181
The “good-natured mountain folk” and the “stormy times”	184
Manhood and execution	187
A fantasy of reconciliation	189
Conclusion: On the threshold between two worlds	191

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[More information](#)

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