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Zealotry and Reason of State in Early Modern Europe

Wolfgang Behringer

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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 south-eastern 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.

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Witchcraft Persecutions in Bavaria

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

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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-

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mained 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 Blocksberg (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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I wish especially to commend my reviewers, among whom many scholarly associations and friendships later emerged: Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia (*Sixteenth Century Journal*), Bob Scribner (*EHR*), Donald Nugent (*AHR*), Robert Walinski-Kiehl (*Bulletin GHI London*), Louis Chatellier (*Francia*), Karl Vocelka (*MIÖG*), Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra (*Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*), Bernd Roeck (*VSWG*), Günter Jerouschek (*Zeitschrift für Neuere Rechtsgeschichte*) and Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger (*ZHF*). My appreciation also goes to the members of the Research Group for Interdisciplinary Witchcraft Studies (AKIH), including the editors of the series “Hexenforschung”, Sönke Lorenz, Dieter R. Bauer, Heide Dienst and Wolfgang Schild. H. C. Erik Midelfort’s seminal work *Witch-Hunting in South-Western Germany* served as a model for the present study. His present collaboration in conjunction with a translation of my *Chonrad Stoeckhlin und die Nachtschar* into American should ensure a degree of terminological unity with this study. I have also benefited from the collegial support and friendship of Lyndal Roper and Nick Stargard. David Lederer’s careful revisions, especially of the introductory and concluding remarks, as well as his help in having chapters five and six translated and included in the present volume added significantly to its quality. Finally, I wish to thank Cambridge University Press for patiently abiding so many corrections and revisions. Last but not least, I wish to excuse myself to Hizran, whose husband spent nights reading over the proofs in bed, and my son, Luis Alper, who could only be allowed to eat small portions of the manuscript.

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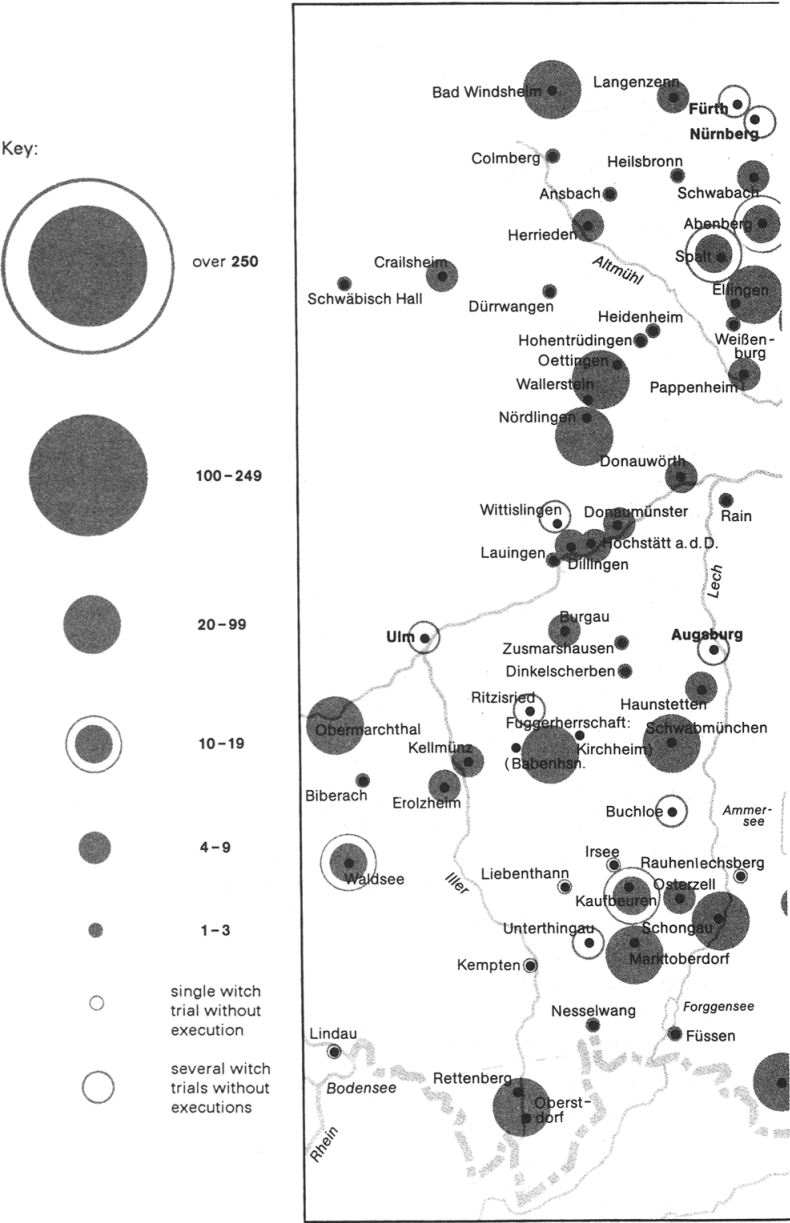
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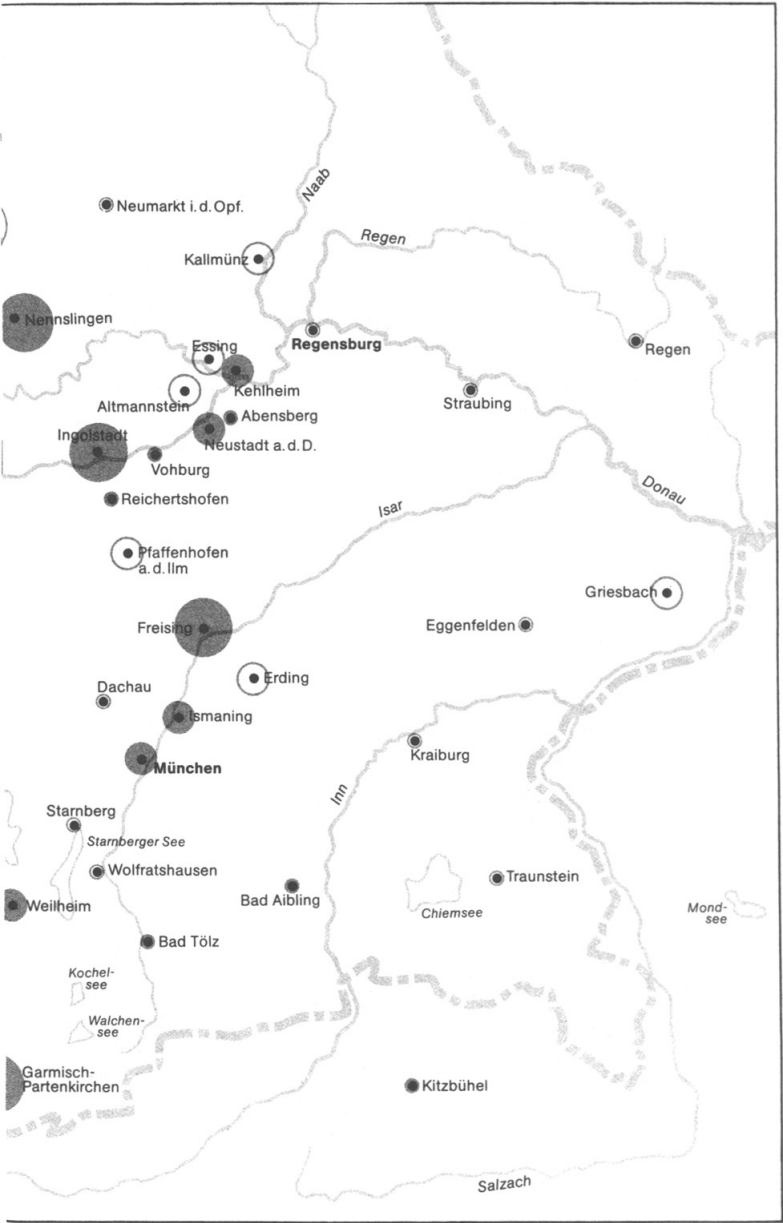
Abbreviations

<i>ADB</i>	<i>Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie</i>
Cgm.	Codex germanicus monacensis, Staatsbibliothek Munich
GR	Generalregistratur
HDA	<i>Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens</i>
Hist. Ver.	Historischer Verein
HStAM	Hauptstaatsarchiv München
HZ	<i>Historische Zeitschrift</i>
KHR	Kurbayern Hofrat
NDB	<i>Neue Deutsche Biographie</i>
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
<i>ZBLG</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für bayrische Landesgeschichte</i>
Zs.	Zeitschrift
<i>ZWLG</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für württembergische Landesgeschichte</i>

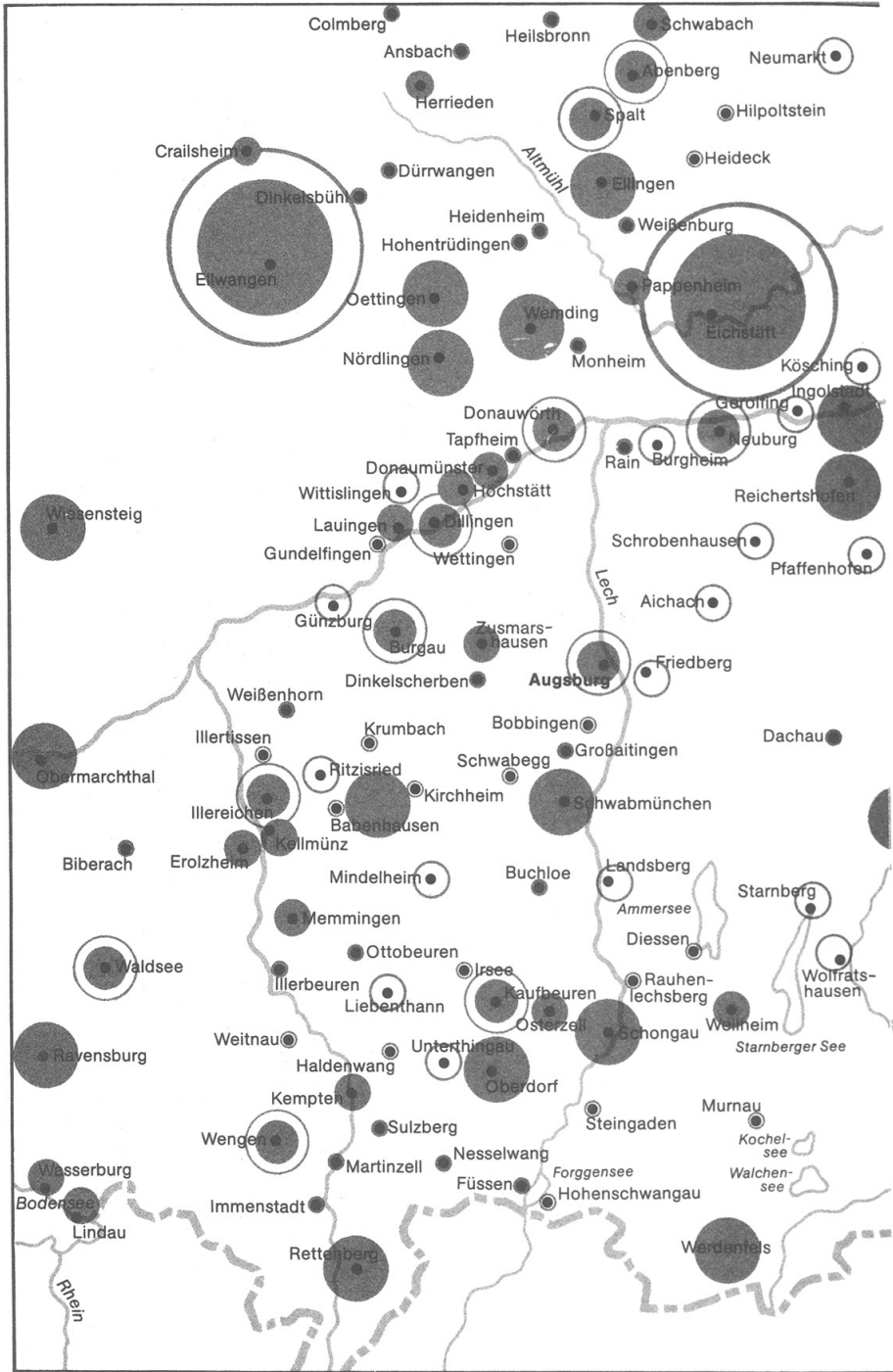


1. Executions of witches around 1590

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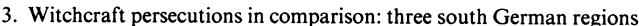


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2. Executions of witches in southeast Germany, 1400–1800





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