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**The Social / Cultural Background of Witch Hunts  
in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County (1700–1783)**

Thesis booklet

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## **Research Objective**

The focus of the dissertation is on witch hunts that ensued in Szabolcs, Szatmár and Bereg Counties between 1700 and 1783. The period under review culminates with 1783, the year in which the final prosecution for witchery was initiated in Szabolcs County. In other words, no further witch hunt investigations ensued in the counties under review in the dissertation.

By utilizing heretofore untapped archival sources, the dissertation strives to present the witchery and beliefs of Szabolcs, Szatmár and Bereg Counties, the attributes and characteristics of witch hunts and the processes that could elicit accusations of witchery. We have attempted to identify what animated witch hunts in the aforementioned counties and to compare and contrast witch trials in the two counties.

According to the hypothesis of our research, witch hunts in the region that led to witch trials originated from broken affairs and relationships of cohabitation arising from everyday life over the course of the period. Further objectives of our research include examination of the attributes of witchery and classification of the accusations made over the course of witch trials. Having listed the various types of accusations, we have also attempted to determine the demographic characteristics of the accusers and the accused alike through a qualitative-quantitative methodology approach. We have further outlined the types of accusations and the types of punishment imposed. Finally, we have shone a light on peculiarities and unique cases of witch trials in the region and compared them to control groups, i.e., regions. We have used documentary material related to witch trials in Bihar and Kolozs Counties and in the so-called Hajdú towns as control groups in our examination due to their geographical proximity and denominational similarity to Szabolcs, Szatmár and Bereg Counties. Correlations recognized in the data outline social conflicts that have supplemented our understanding of witch hunts in the region.

## Sources Used

The amount of documentary material related to witchery is relatively plentiful. In other words, meticulous review of the material should yield new results and findings. The research basis of the dissertation consists of published primary sources together with uncovered yet unpublished documents related to Szabolcs County.

Among publications that compiled Hungarian sources related to witch hunts, we have used over the course of our work the source publications of Andor Komáromy, Ferenc Schram, József Bessenyei and the research team composed of Éva Pócs and Gábor Klaniczay. We have additionally used local history documents as well as monographs and studies related to the domestic legal history of the era by dint of the criminal suit documents and case histories found therein. Edited by József Bessenyei, the second volume of *A magyarországi boszorkányság forrásai (The Sources of Witchery in Hungary)* was published in 2000. Witch trial documents from Kis-Küküllő County to Szabolcs County from the 16th–18th centuries were disclosed in this volume. Some of the trials in Szabolcs County – twenty-nine trials – were excluded from the publication of sources even though these had been planned to be included in the next volume of the series. György Csaba Szoboszlay has been credited with uncovering the documents; however, the aforementioned sources remain unpublished to this day.

Beyond the library materials, the most significant collection of sources, heretofore unpublished, are stored at the Witchery Archives in Szabolcs County. Part of the witch trial documents of the Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County Archives of the National Archives of Hungary can be found within the documents of the Noble Assembly of the county among the documents of Assembly Minutes (*Protocollo*) and Assembly documents (*Acta politica*). The other part can be found within the Judicial documents (*Acta judicialia*) of Szabolcs County, mainly among the Investigations (*Inquisitiones*) documents.

## Research Findings

Thanks to analysis of the archival sources, numerous research findings have seen the light of day through the publication of the dissertation, providing nuance to our understanding of the social problem veiled by witch trials in the region.

After reviewing the documents on witch trials that occurred in the region and the testimonies therein, we have determined that local beliefs corresponded closely to Transylvanian-Hungarian beliefs. The presence of Serbian and Romanian beliefs in the witchery ethic of the region is likewise evincible. The witch's appearance, knowledge and endeavors play a central role in the witchery ethic. The members of the communities of the region mostly perceived witches uniformly. As per the sources, in terms of witchery and conflict, we have determined that the most common type of witch in the region studied was the so-called social witch. Her appearance was based on the difficulties of everyday cohabitation and substantive confrontations associated with poor neighborly relations. Also common was the appearance of the analytical witch, who played the role of scapegoat in the event of tragedies and misfortune. A social class or group was not exclusively singled out for the role of scapegoat; an accusation of witchery was related to (sometimes complex) animosity and disagreements that sprang from everyday living in the community (i.e., neighbor vs. neighbor, family member vs. family member or midwife vs. her patients). Accusers spoke about witchery and witches in accordance with the factors created by the socio-cultural environment (rules, norms and customs).

In addition to the appearance of the witch and associated beliefs thereof, the system of relations underlying witch hunts that also acted as a trigger thereof is likewise worthy of our attention. Accusations of witchery in the region were not marked by panicky pursuits, but rather persistent and regular hunts. Accusations were mainly driven by economic, social / cultural tensions in the local communities, including sectarian conflicts, garrisoned troops and dissimilarities between locals and newcomers. Moreover, witch hunts intensified in the wake of pestilence. Accusations of witchery were evoked by various conflicts, dissimilarities and mutual living spaces and can be likewise understood as the consequences of everyday cohabitation. The forms of behavior evoked by the circumstances of community or individual conflicts and their coping strategies embodied witchery in Szabolcs and Szatmár Counties at the time. Compared to rural communities, immorality or the accusation of having committed a common law offense was more emphatic in urban communities. In Szabolcs County, the village environment typically abounded with accusations of witchery. In several cases, the minutes of

the trials show a rather arduous accusatory mechanism and image of the village. Regarding Szatmár County, we can say that most of the accused hailed from Nagybánya, Felsőbánya or the surrounding area. In urban communities, the greater size of the population and the presence of outsiders who had come to the market carried the possibility of the eruption of conflict.

In the territories under review, approximately half of the accused were serfs or urban civilians, but significant numbers of servants, shepherds and cotters were also implicated. In their case, forms of everyday mutual contact and communication and the spatial appearance and embeddedness of individual relations are easy to ascertain. Victims and offenders were not blood related in the majority of cases, but regularly shared similar social status. In the territory under review – with the exception of one or two cases – accusations coming “from below” were rare. With regard to the age and family status of the accused and of the victims, we have determined that they were usually middle-aged and married. The majority of witches were members of the community and lived in the confined and complex system of relations that provided the foundation for their mindset towards family, neighborhood, employer and coworker.

Some accusations took aim at the pasts of the accused, shining a light on how they had been viewed within their communities. More commonplace causes in urban communities were contradictions between practitioners of positive magic (healers and midwife-witches) and their clientele (owing to failed treatment, calling upon a different midwife during delivery and complications arising during delivery), whereas in the villages of the county, they were everyday cohabitation (owing to quarrels between family members or neighbors) and differences of opinion over farming. In the village environment, accusations of witchery alluded to poor neighborly relations, which – among other things – perhaps indicated competitiveness in farming. Turning down a request – a snub or rebuke – or animal husbandry at the expense of someone else usually aroused negative feelings in the neighborhood, which could escalate to accusations of witchery. Through the *rontásnarratív* (narrative of the offender), we can see that communities strove to uphold the accustomed social order. Therefore, steps were taken to quell behavior and lifestyles that conflicted with the norm. In other words, moral offenses of any kind were not tolerated. In view of the social context of witch hunts, it can be defined as the relationship between change (the power structure and the transformation of medical care as well as the appearance and settlement of ethnically and religiously diverse groups of people) and the response (both group and individual) to the change.

In the Early Modern Era in Hungary, aspirations to centralize the empire led to the cessation of witch hunts. In the wake of the decriminalization of magic, the number of accusations of witchery fell, but did not end entirely. In the territories under review, criminal proceedings were initiated against a total of fourteen individuals for witchery or illegal magical activities between 1760 and 1783. The municipal court in Nagybánya sentenced Sára Deák (née Berkesz) to death in 1762, a verdict which was also carried out. She was the last woman to be executed for witchery in Hungary. In Szabolcs County, the last criminal proceeding ever initiated on suspicion of witchery occurred in 1783.

In summary, we can state that the examined material has outlined the general tendency of social conflicts and confrontations playing a definitive role in the evolution of witch trials in Szabolcs, Szatmár and Bereg Counties. Crises that hit the region not only led to a fall in population but also upended the accustomed way of life over the course of the era. The relocation and settlement of foreigners, which generated tension, only worsened the situation. In certain cases, we have seen the great significance that people of the era put on spoken words and their impact on the evolution of witch hunts as well as the influence that malevolence, e.g., gossip engendered by envy, had on the judgment of the accused.

### **Additional Research Vectors**

With regard to witch hunts in Szabolcs and Szatmár Counties, we have tried to ascertain the make-up of the victims and the framework of the accusatory process, the nature of conflicts between the accused and the accusers, the outline of the various other conflicts behind witch hunts and social / cultural reasons and functions that played a role in sparking witch hunts. By all means, the findings can be compared to the conventions of witch hunts in other regions. Therefore, we believe that carrying out additional detailed analyses are justified, e.g., of witch hunts in the various regions of Transdanubia.

Documents referring to witch trials in Szabolcs and Szatmár Counties have provided the opportunity to explore further the world of beliefs and witchery. If examined from a medical-historical perspective, individual cases of bewitchment – as well as collection of the flora and minerals used in folk medicine to induce confessions – could also make for intriguing studies.