The Routledge History of Witchcraft

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Child-Witches

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From the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, ecclesiastical and secular courts, with the population’s active participation, put alleged witches to trial. However, not only were adults accused of the tort of witchcraft and subsequently executed, but a considerable number of children were as well. Little of their history has been researched yet. Thus, I am presenting a series of the most important results that are based on my research of four hundred and twenty cases in Europe and New England. All the literature dealing with the topic of child-witches, with all its case studies, has been listed in the bibliography to allow those keen on digging further into the matter access to this current topic of research.

Number and chronology of child-witch trials

Witchcraft researcher E. W. Monter’s publication *Witchcraft in France and Switzerland* (1976) was the first to work under the supposition that child-witch trials only formed a minor part of all legal proceedings against witches and thus were actually not of major importance. However, so far research has been unable to precisely quantify this, although quite a number of documents mention a considerable amount of children in witch trials. Here are a few well-known examples: In 1705, courts and clergy in Brusio in the Swiss canton of Graubünden had to deal with an indeterminable number of catholic children suspected of witchcraft; however, only the trials of three of those children have been mentioned in detail. On the other hand, in what today is known as Nidwalden, provincial governor Thomas Zelger had written a letter to the authorities in Schwyz (1631) in which he reported that witchcraft had particularly increased amongst children. Despite Zelger failing to make any attempt to supply the names of these children, it is well known that between 1626 and 1634 the courts there had convicted nine minors of witchcraft, four of whom had verifiably been executed. A short note from Fribourg in Switzerland mentions that between 1634 and 1635 several children and teenagers had fallen under suspicion for witchcraft and had subsequently been executed. In 1634 alone, it is purported, more than thirty people had been executed, with a considerable number of children among them. A year later in 1635 the number had allegedly risen to several hundred people, with about ten children and...
teenagers between 9 and 17 years of age being sentenced to death. In Bamberg, Germany, a pamphlet was published in 1625 claiming that quite a number of girls, aged between 7 and 10, had turned to witchcraft, and that more than twenty of them had been executed and burned at the stake. Between 1683 and 1684 the district seat of Calw in Württemberg gained notoriety when over seventy boys and girls claimed that they had been seduced by the devil and that they had been flying on broomsticks, forks or animals (e.g. goats, chicken or cats). Similarly, several children and teenagers had been involved in the witchcraft proceedings in the imperial city of Augsburg (1618–1730). Over half of these trials were child-witch trials. Today it is proven that altogether almost fifty children and teenagers had been standing trial. Between 1723 and 1730 alone around thirty children aged between 7 and 14 years had to stand trial. The town of Würzburg (Germany) held a considerable number of child-witch trials. Soldan and Hepp published lists of so-called “burnings of witches” from between 1627 and 1629, and those lists were compiled between the seventh and the twenty-eighth burning (altogether there were forty-two burnings!). Midelfort enumerates almost thirty child-witches aged between 9 and 14 years that had been executed. Walinski-Kiehl counts one hundred and sixty persons executed during this time, forty-one of which were children. The anonymous author of a pamphlet called Das hexen Weßen betref fent (1629) mentions a further four hundred people under suspicion of witchcraft that were supposed to have carried out their nefarious deeds there – among them around three hundred children and teenagers aged either 3, 4, 7, or up to 15 years of age. The child-witch trials of Freising, held between 1715 and 1723, also included whole groups of children between 7 and 10 years of age. In 1678 allegedly around one hundred witches and wizards had been executed in the Austrian archbishopric of Salzburg, among them many child-witches between 10 and 14 years old. For this particular year the Austrian researcher Fritz Byloff lists around one hundred and eighty accused and states that around half of the witches had been younger than 20 years, including numerous children below 10 or even below 5 years old. Mülleder counts ninety-five children and juveniles under 20 years of one hundred and thirty-five accused persons. Eighteen of them were under 10 years old. Around 1680 approximately 70 per cent of those suspected of witchcraft and incarcerated in the dungeons of Salzburg were reported to be younger than 22 years.

In 1669–70 the Swedish village of Mora had been scourged by witchcraft. In those two years alone more than seventy children had been involved in child-witch trials. The Basque child-witch trials, which took place at the beginning and at the end of the sixteenth century (in Navarra), are among the earliest proceedings against children. During the peak (1610–12, 1614), when confessing witches had been promised immunity from prosecution, the Spanish inquisitor Alonso de Salazar y Frias, according to his own report, investigated 1802 people under suspicion of witchcraft, with 1384 of them being minors.

At first glance, these listed cases suggest that child-witches always turned up in groups and that child witchcraft had therefore been a case of a collectively committed crime. However, my comparison of over four hundred cases instead shows that until today research has (almost) exclusively concentrated on cases in which a large number of child-witches had been involved. Individual cases, on the other hand,
were either neglected or used by researchers as a prime example for their theories, but without supplying further proof in form of researched fact. However, my research of the Swiss child-witch trials, with more than half of them being trials dealing with single cases, shows that, more often than not, child-witch trials were actually penal proceedings against individual children. The majority of those cases shows that very often one child claiming to be either capable of witchcraft, or of being bewitched, encouraged other children to make similar claims to be child-witches. With current scientific knowledge only one thing can be stated with certainty: The amount of child-witch trials can only be estimated. However, the many short entries in available sources very clearly indicate that more children had to stand trial because of witchcraft than has thus far been thought possible.

In this regard, another claim circulating in research literature has to be mentioned, namely, that child-witch trials had been a phenomenon of a late phase or of the peak of an excessive persecution. The earliest case known to us in which a child is suspected of witchcraft dates back to 1441 (Berner Simmental, Switzerland); the last child-witch trial resulting in an execution was held in 1756 (Landshut, Germany). Child-trials reached their peak between 1600 and 1700. Thus, beginning, peak and end of the persecution of child-witches corresponded exactly with the persecution of adult suspects. They ran parallel to each other. Furthermore, many penal proceedings against adults indeed happened neither simultaneously nor in any one country, town or village; nor did they end in the same year. Nevertheless, the child-trials were always conducted at the same time. Here are just a few examples: In the British Isles, the period of witch trials were between the 1542 and 1712 (with the peak between the 1540s and 1640s). The last execution happened in 1684. The penal proceedings involving children, happened between 1560 and 1634 (e.g. Essex, Huntingdonshire and Lancashire). On the American continent the child-witch trials appeared at the beginning and in the middle of the wave of trials against adults (e.g. Boston 1688, Salem 1692). In the electorate of Trier and the territories of the imperial abbey St. Maximin both witch trials and child-witch trials started around the end of the sixteenth century. In Augsburg, on the other hand, the first witch trial, that was held in 1625 and ended with a burning, was actually a child-witch trial. Here both witch trials and child-witch trials actually cover the same period (1618–1730). Even the Swiss persecution of witches, that has usually been set between 1420–30 and 1782, shows parallels. Here trials involving children happened between 1441 and 1789. Executions were carried out from 1571 to 1712. Although further parts and regions of the country show, from a macro perspective, a simultaneous appearance of cases against both adults and children, it should also be noted that for many countries detailed information about child-witch trials is still lacking, thus making it impossible to draw clear conclusions.

**Jurisdiction, offence and sentence**

Since the early modern era, and under the influence of the reception of Roman law, small children (infantes) were declared as not being criminally responsible; later this was changed to being partially criminally responsible but unable to stand trial, and thus they were not subject to criminal law. Minors (impuberes) that were regarded as partially responsible from the age of 7, sometimes even 6 years,
usually did not remain unpunished, but the adult penal system was only applied to a certain extent. According to sources of law, full criminal responsibility was generally set at the age of 14 years.\textsuperscript{24} Based on this, it is assumed that child-witch trials were actually illegal criminal proceedings – but there is no proof to verify this assumption, either. Although the law usually granted offending children an exceptional position, it did not come to application in cases of children witchcraft (religious offence). Three aspects played a major role when evaluating child-witches: The belief in early sexual maturity, proof of malicious intent and the general belief in witchcraft as an exceptional crime.

As the ability to have an ejaculation or to menstruate was equated with accountability, both small children (i.e. infantes) and minors (impuberes) were deemed – in case of an offence – as having diminished responsibility and thus were also regarded as unable to give evidence. In cases of witchcraft, however, different criteria were applied when it came to the aspects of sexual maturity. Probably most important here were the views of lawyers and clergy that even children at the age of 3 or 4 years were having sexual interactions with the devil, thus allowing the onset of puberty much earlier than with other, normal children. A second aspect was proving that children were able to act with malicious intent. It was the duty of the judges at the time to pass sentence according to the Holy Scripture that saw the wickedness of mankind as one of the major reasons why evil was able to spread in the world (\textit{Genesis} 6, 5–7). In cases involving children, proof of malicious intent was enough to lift the protection under the terms of criminal responsibility, thus declaring their exceptional position as null and void. Among the earliest texts mentioning the clause of malicious intent in writing are Canon law (according to the motto “malitia supplet aetatem”) and the Italian penology (“nec correctio aliqua sperenda est”). Thus in cases where the maliciousness was deemed to override considerations of age (i.e. the offence perpetrated by a minor was regarded as a serious crime, or the offence showed signs of a particularly violent nature) and there was no hope for reform of the child, then even sentencing and execution of minors was legitimate in the eyes of the law.\textsuperscript{25} The oldest German law that includes this clause is the \textit{Richterlich Clagspiegel} (1436). Already here it is stressed that, in case of heresy, not having reached the age of consent does not guarantee immunity from criminal prosecution.\textsuperscript{26} In these cases even the youngest were to be sentenced according to adult law. This clause can be found in all the major legal texts of this period, including the \textit{Wormser Reformation} (1498/99), the \textit{Constitutio Criminalis Bambergensis} (1507, Bambergische Halsgerichtsordnung) and the \textit{Constitutio Criminalis Carolina} (1532, Peinliche Halsgerichtsordnung Karls V.), that stayed in force until 1806. With the help of other felonies (“Malefizdelikte”) it is possible to prove that in certain cases minors had been illegally executed but not in cases of child-witch trials.\textsuperscript{27} The last important aspect that led to the execution of children according to adult law was fairly simple. To practise magic was on the one hand regarded as \textit{crimen mixti fori}, that is, as an offence that was prosecuted by both secular and church authorities. On the other hand, witchcraft was regarded as a most serious crime in the fight against which the rule of due process could be ignored (\textit{crimen exeptum}) and thus one of the most serious crimes according to the law at the time. The law made no exception when it came to cases of child witchery. Another fact is actually quite remarkable in this context: Although even at that time it had been decreed by law that names of minors were
not allowed to be published, a notably large number of names of child-witches even below the age of 5 years are mentioned in the records. This allows us to conclude that in many cases of witchcraft involving children the clause of protection was not applied and that in cases of exceptional crimes lawyers refrained from applying this clause.

Very often child-witches were not only the defendants, but also the key witnesses for the prosecution in witch trials. The participation of minors as witnesses can be explained by the introduction of the inquisitorial system that was specifically created for the prosecution of heretics, wizards and witches. In contrast to the older accusatorial process (“Akkusationsprozess”), proceedings and evidence stood at the centre of the inquisitorial trial; this allowed groups of persons to be admitted as witnesses that had previously been excluded.28 This meant that not only were women, accomplices, perjurers and the excommunicated admitted as witnesses, even next of kin, partners, spouses and children were admitted as well. This new definition – of who was allowed to enter the witness box and receive its legitimacy, in this case admittance of witness statements by minors both on the European mainland and on the British Isles – proved particularly devastating.29 In particular, statements from child witnesses always had a deleterious effect for those who stood accused.

It was part of the education of children, publicly and privately, to inform them about the practises of witchcraft. Additionally, it was not unusual for children and teenagers to be present at executions – which were always preceded by the reading of the confessions. Thus, it is no surprise that even children and teenagers knew quite well about witchcraft and devilry. Special lists of questions, or so-called “Fragezettel” (notes on questions), were used during the interrogations, posing questions that, to a great extent, corresponded with contemporary demonological views; it is not surprising that there is hardly any difference between confessions of adults and those of children. On the other hand, it seems quite astonishing that adults were surprised by the extent of the children’s knowledge, which meant they interpreted these extensive witness statements as proof of complicity.30

Altogether the elements of witchcraft mentioned most frequently by both adults and children were *maleficium* (harm to persons or animals) and attending the witches’ sabbath which was usually reached by a magic flight. Many child-witches told how they had either harmed or killed humans or animals with the help of magic potions or magic powders. The act of conjuring with particular animals (e.g. mice, birds, cats, flies or toads) equally formed part of the idea of *maleficium*, thus it appears very often in children’s confessions. Many of them also admitted to have participated in a witches’ sabbath. Not only had they been flying there together with other witches, but equally often also with the devil himself. The pact with the devil on the other hand was a rare offence and only found in some of the sources or some of the regions. Sexual intercourse with the devil also only played an insignificant role in child-witch trials. Non-historians, on the other hand, regarded the mentioning of the illicit sex, unlike other elements of offence, as fact and as evidence that child-witches had been raped and physically abused – which is in complete contradiction to the results of serious scholarly research.31 In Switzerland only seven out of one hundred and thirty child-witches told about sexual interaction with the devil. Although sexual offences have been mentioned in child-witch trials, these rather fall under the category of sodomy and bestiality.
In actual fact, today we hardly know what crimes – if any – these child-witches actually had committed. Reading between the lines of interrogation records and confessions you find several offences mentioned, including theft, arson, manslaughter and grievous bodily harm. Under the law at the time, all those crimes were considered to be serious crimes, punishable by death. Signs of melancholy, faint-heartedness and anxiety, believed to occur under the influence of wizardry and witchcraft, equally raised suspicions. Based on several descriptions we can also learn that many children, before they had been seduced by the devil, were known to the authorities for their naughtiness, their lack of respect, their aggressive or sluggish behaviour and for various criminal activities. According to some of the interrogation records many of those children had previously spent some time in prison.

In cases of child-witchcraft a distinction was made between witness statements and confessions of witchcraft. Whether a child under suspicion of witchcraft had observed an act of wizardry, had been bewitched by another witch, had a relation with the devil or a witch was actually irrelevant in the end because according to a demonological approach the contact with the devil alone already made the child guilty of having committed crimes against the faith. The decision as to whether a child should be regarded or treated as victim, culprit or witness was ultimately with the adults and the legal authorities. However, in each and every case – and this is quite remarkable – the decision was not immediately made, but instead it was made conditional to the further behaviour of the child. The suspicion of witchcraft was only a matter of interest as long as the child claimed to be in league with the devil. Statements by children that they had “only dreamt of witchcraft” very often turn up in interrogation records, and both judges and theologians have interpreted this as signs of the “salvation” of these children.

In the 1930s Fritz Byloff still worked under the assumption that child-witch trials had happened before the seventeenth century but that none of them had actually led to executions. Actually, it is obvious that this is wrong. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, a lot more minors had been accused of witchcraft and executed than anyone thought. In Switzerland alone (i.e. the Old Swiss Confederacy) one child in three involved in a trial of witchcraft was executed. According to law the penalty for convicted witches was death by being burnt alive at the stake. In case of child-witches, because of their age, the method of execution was almost always modified. The death sentence was altered equal to the adult cases in such a way that the minors were first killed by either decapitation, strangulation, drowning or hanging before burning their bodies, but sometimes their bodies were not burned at all. Other methods of mercy killings included poisoning or exsanguinations, although they were applied only rarely. In the German principalities and Britain, executions were public and took place in broad daylight. However, in Switzerland the executions usually were not public, and additionally children were executed at night instead of during the day.

The second-most frequent penalty for child-witches was exclusion from the community. Fearing contamination or reputational damage or simply because of ignorance, these children were isolated by having them imprisoned or deported to closed-off areas of the village (e.g. excluded from church service, kept away from fountains), or driven from their homeland. Depending on religious affiliation the courts showed different approaches and verdicts. Monter developed the theory that particularly
Catholic areas saw child-witch trials, as compared to Protestant areas. This should be rephrased: In Catholic areas a lot more children were executed after being found guilty of witchcraft when compared to Protestant areas. Catholic regions are characterised by a large number of executed or tortured child-witches; in Protestants areas, on the other hand, the belief in education and salvation of a reigned, as can be seen in their preferred code of punishment. In particular, they kept child-witches as prisoners for months if not years and used them as cheap work-forces. In Zurich or St. Gallen where no child-witch has been executed the authorities ordinarily deported impertinent and sluggish juvenile delinquents to the workhouses. The judges of the county Lippe in turn assigned child-witches to pray and work. This behaviour reflected the official line of the Protestants, especially Luther and his followers, which equated work with education.

The genesis of suspicion

The view that the concept of child-witches was a fairly new construct following in the footsteps of the persecution of witches was based on an erroneous assumption by some scholars. Some demonologists, inquisitors and lawyers dealt with the idea of Satan’s children (the teachings of “incubus” and “succubus”) and with children possessed by demons. Those best-known today are Jean Bodin († 1596), Peter Binsfeld († 1598), Martin Anton Delrio († 1608) or Nicolas Rémy († 1612). They all were then regarded as the leading experts in the development of a devil’s cult based on scientific research and witchcraft offences. And they all were strong advocates for torture and execution being applied, even to minors. However, in their judgement of child-witches, neither they nor other scholars referred to previous experts in this field; they based their prosecutions on their own experience with child-witches. As even theologians claimed that witchcraft was a novel phenomenon at the time, child witchcraft had to be a new form of danger. However, the children of the heretics were already in the focus of judgment. The belief in child-witches was consequently not without old parallels. Although the church, in all its documents, never referred to older cases of child witchcraft and always described children as victims of devils, demons or witches, according to traditional lore, it never denied the existence of children who practised witchcraft. Even at the beginning of the fifteenth century the idea of a child-witch was an integral part of the idea of witches. As already mentioned, we know of the case from 1441 in which a small child was accused of knowledge of witchcraft.

If you attempt to profile child-witches the result is quite straightforward. The majority of child-witches were between 7 and 12 years old when they attracted the attention of the people and the courts. This can be proven not only with examples of the Swiss cases but also with German cases. From a legal point of view this concerned “impuberes” who were to some limited extent criminally responsible, but it also concerned those children who, according to popular belief and theology, had already mastered witchcraft and who, in the eyes of educators, were easy to educate and had already recently taken their place in the work-chain.

The view of a child-witch, in its entirety, did not follow any gender stereotype, that is, accusations of witchcraft were made against boys and girls in equal measures. But looking at the confessions it is possible to see a leaning towards one or the other
sex. In almost all Protestant areas (or jurisdictions) more or less as many girls were accused of witchcraft as boys; in Catholic areas the idea of child-witches was mainly applied to boys. Even in Switzerland more boys were accused of witchcraft than girls in the Catholic parts were. Moreover, the idea of witches had a rather dynamic character even where children were concerned, that is, the gender percentages were varying from interval to interval. In Augsburg, for example, a lot more girls than boys stood trial in the first half of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries; in the second half of the seventeenth century and in the 1720s it was predominantly boys. In the Imperial city of Rothenburg ob der Tauber a 6 year-old boy was accused first (1587), and then a girl, second. From 1627 until 1673 only girls were suspected of witchcraft, and after then and until 1709 only boys were suspected. The Swiss child-witch trials show the same trend succinctly: Before the 1650s predominantly boys were involved, and after that the cases mainly involved girls.

At first glance, child-witches do not fall into any particular social category. Affected were children with both or only one parent alive, orphans, foundlings, illegitimate children, vagabonds, pupils or students. They were children of artisans, councillors, clergy or mayors from a well-off or at least respected background, but they were equally from lower classes, or offspring of criminals, or they had relatives with a bad reputation. Some of them, while accused, either had a job or were in an apprenticeship. Witchcraft among children was a phenomenon stretching across all classes. However, amongst those children convicted of witchcraft and subsequently executed, there were none from a rich family or a well-off background. Child-witches from “respectable families” were often portrayed exclusively as victims of witches or gave evidence in witch-trials.

Both theologians and lawyers defined the term “child-witch” as a minor who had been infected/bewitched by the devil or was a descendant of someone practising witchcraft. The existence of sin, demonic possession, wizardry or witchcraft in children was mainly regarded as divine punishment against the parents who had either neglected or cursed their children. The cursing of a child by its parents or by other adults is a classic motive in all descriptions of demonic possession, and it was assumed that the cursed were made susceptible to being possessed by demons. Thus, children under suspicion were first asked who had seduced them into wizardry and witchcraft. They mainly named their parents or other family members as their seducers, but also other adults and children in their immediate surroundings who had fallen under suspicion. However, the view that it was mainly members of the family that introduced their offspring to witchcraft clearly dominated. Children very often came under suspicion through one of their parents. In the majority of cases against child-witches, while they were being prosecuted, their parents or other family members had already appeared at court, having been accused of witchcraft and/or executed. The persecution of members of the same family and of their relatives over three generations was no rare occurrence, as can be proven with several cases. In Appenzell, several generations of a family were persecuted for almost sixty years. Even the accused child-witches of Unterwalden belonged to families, which stood under suspicion for many years. Under close scrutiny, those family trials hardly exhibit the deliberate decisions by governments, authorities or clerics keen on extinguishing witchcraft. As a rule, the first accusations and complaints came from the public and from within the ranks of their
own families, or sometimes from the suspects who – for whatever reason and maybe oblivious of the consequences – accused themselves. Considering the information available it would be wrong to assume that child-witch trials were only a late or fringe occurrence, or that they were a short-term phenomenon that should be researched separately from trials against adults.

Notes
3 For the following statements about trials in Switzerland see Bettlé, “Wenn Saturn seine Kinder frisst,” 178, 192ff, 209ff.
7 Soldan and Heppe, Hexenprozesse, 17f.
8 See also H.C. Erik Midelfort, Witch Hunting in Southwestern Germany 1562–1684 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1972), 283.
10 Weber, Kinderhexenprozesse, 263.
12 Soldan and Heppe, Hexenprozesse, 54.
16 Soldan and Heppe, Geschichte der Hexenprozesse, 285.
18 Dillinger arrives at the same result (Germany). Dillinger, Kinder im Hexenprozess.
21 Behringer, “Kinderhexenprozesse,” 46. The accused was a 14-year-old orphan.
23 Ibid., 171, 192.
24 In fact, the age of criminal responsibility could vary and has been determined differently by various legal sources. The “Sachsenspiegel” (1220–35) or the “Constitutio Criminalis Carolina” (1532) set the age of criminal responsibility at 14 years (boys and girls). Sometimes the law made a distinction between boys (14 years) and girls (12 years). According to Old English law the age of criminal responsibility was reached at 10 years, in


26 Deutsch, *Klagspiegel*, 541.


29 Sebald, *Hexenkinder*, 89.


32 Byloff, *Hexenglaube*, 88–89.


34 This information refers to Switzerland where no children had been executed by letting them bleed to death. Germany, however, applied bloodletting as a means of execution quite frequently. See also Dillinger, *Kinder im Hexenprozess*, 63.


40 Some researchers proceed from the assumption that the image of a witch in the body of a child took hold during the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries and was considered new. Behringer, “Kinderhexenprozesse,” 32–33; Weber, *Kinderhexenprozesse*, 24; Sebald, *Hexenkinder*, 37.

41 One of the biggest problems in the research of child-witches is the definition of the term “child”. Under the term “child-witch trials” the majority of those in the field of witchcraft research included cases of adolescents and young adults who, according to the view at the time, had already come of age (onset of puberty) and were thus subject to adult law. The reasons for this are often due to the limited field of research and due to the scarcity of available sources. However, we have to work from the assumption that there is a willingness to apply the modern definition of child to older cases. Not only is this not conducive to the contemporary view of who or what a child is, it does not correspond to the historical legal criteria that the child-witch trials were subject to. According to this view all results listed here are based on cases of child-witches that were between 1 and 14 years old.


Bibliography (selection)


