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France is an important country in terms of witch hunting not only because it is a very vast and populated country but also because the witch hunts fuelled a powerful debate among the elites and a large number of trials in local courts, and also because they have specificities. If Joan of Arc is sometimes considered as one of the first witches burnt in 1431, the real witch craze was operating later, between 1570 and 1670. The official end of witch persecution took place with the promulgation of an Ordinance in 1682 by Louis XIV.\(^1\)

The question of the number of victims accused of being witches is difficult because it refers to the question of the definition of France. At the time of the witch hunting, the realm of France did not include all the territories on its margins, even if these territories were sometimes strongly related to the kingdom of France. The great witch hunt century (1570–1670) resulted in only a few hundred executions.\(^2\) If we consider only the realm of France, the persecution of witches was not very harsh, with a low number of executions. It is very difficult to estimate the exact number of victims because the local archives are lacking dramatically in many places.

But a sign of the intensity of the witch persecution is given by the most famous sovereign court of the realm, the “Parlement de Paris”. France had a much-elaborated judicial system during the early modern period that enhanced the activity of the Parlement of Paris, whose area of action, called “ressort”, covered roughly half the country.\(^3\) Besides the Parlement of Paris, smaller regional Parlements supervised the witch persecution in Rouen, Rennes, Bordeaux, Pau, Toulouse, Aix-en-Provence, Grenoble and Dijon. The role of the Parlement was to supervise all legal procedures, including the criminal causes. The inquisitorial procedure was in use and ruled by the Ordinance of Villers-Cotterets from 1539 until the end of the witch hunting period when, in 1670, Colbert released a new criminal code.

Even if the witchcraft accusations were not extensively detailed in the process under the Parlement, these indications are important because they are usually the only documents available on the cases. The actual proceedings of the local trials and before the high court were not kept, but the accused had to stand in person before the Parlement. So every prisoner entering the Parisian jail at the Conciergerie located in the Palais de Justice in the heart of the “île de la Cité” should be registered in the “registre des écrous”, the record of the prisoner’s arrival. This very brief paragraph
mentioned the crime and the jurisdiction whence the prisoner came. Another paragraph was added when the prisoner was able to leave the jailhouse that mentioned the final decision of the court of justice — called the “chambre de la Tournelle” and composed of councillors — the sentence, established by an “arrêt du parlement”, and the date of its promulgation. The full text of this “arrêt”, transcribed in very thick and heavy books, usually gives more information about the case, which is precious to historians.

The local courts conducted the trials by collecting witnesses and interrogating the accused. In the case of an accusation of witchcraft, usually called “sortilege” in the trials, the local courts had to ask the highest court of justice for permission to torture the suspected witches with the “question extraordinaire” after 1624, and the culprit could always send his case up on appeal before the relevant Parlement. Luckily, the archives of the Parlement de Paris are rather complete, and they have been studied by Alfred Soman.4 The judicial court reveals 1481 accusations of witchcraft for the entire period covered by the archival material, with cases dating from the beginning of the 15th century to the end of the 17th century. This number does not represent all accusations, as many culprits did not know their right to appeal their case, or could not exercise this right because the local courts did not want or could not afford to pay the expense of going to the appeal court. It also does not include all the lynchings which stayed out of the law. But it is an indication of a quite low persecution of witchcraft with legal procedures and extrajudicial executions.

For the other Parlements, only 650 trials are available to be studied: 380 for Rouen between 1564 and 1660, 160 for Dijon and around 100 for Aix-en-Provence. The other archives have been destroyed or are currently unavailable. Concerning the general distribution of the trials, the accusations were not numerous before 1575, but increased suddenly, reaching a level that was stable until about 1620. After that period, only a few cases appeared, although some local witch crazes counterbalanced this decrease. These panics took place in the Champagne-Ardennes and Basque regions, where Pierre de Lancre boasted about executing hundreds of witches; however, he only put 12 culprits to death for certain, with only perhaps 80 in total. The judge in Bordeaux left an interesting demonological book about his experience called Tableau de l’inconstance des mauvais anges et démons. The Parlements usually followed the Paris trend, except for in Rouen, where the Norman judges wanted to show more severity than their Parisian peers. The Parlement of Paris was proud to play the role of the prestigious court which embodied the spirit of the educated elite, demonstrating rationality and a strict observance of the law and punishing procedural abuses committed by lesser courts.

The Parlement already in 1491 had rehabilitated the accused from the Vauderie of Arras, a famous witch craze that took place in 1459 in northern France, where local abuses had been committed. Despite the fact that this city belonged to Burgundy, Arras was subject to the Parisian appellate system. The Parlement of Paris’ clemency is evident in the low level of confirmed death penalty sentences issued by local courts: 40% of the accused were condemned to death by lower justices, but only a quarter of these were actually executed, with the others usually banished or simply released instead. This clemency was animated by the will to restrain abuses but also by the real difficulties of presenting proof other than allegations, as evidence and direct witnesses did not operate as proof in the case of witchcraft. The
prestigious court of justice wanted to control any accusations that could have been a simple way to get rid of a neighbour in case of disagreement. And the Parlement did send reprimands to local courts when they failed in their mission, calling the local judges to Paris to explain their cases, especially when illegal swimming tests had been performed. So the result was a decrease in the number of appeal procedures after 1620. The message from the head of the system passed down to the inferior courts. A perfect example illustrated this control: in 1641, three officials of the local court at Bragelonne were found guilty for the murder of a suspected witch and were hanged in the place de Grève in Paris at the exact place where witches were usually executed. The echo of this affair was relayed in the entire ressort.

The important role of the Parlements diminished the role of the Church, especially with the absence of national Inquisition and local inquisitorial tribunals after the middle of the 16th century. The Parlement of Paris had a role in religious values even if its councillors had different faiths: the court was always Catholic but showed a quite moderate Gallican position towards papacy and the French Church. The role of the University of Paris should not be neglected, because the scholastic theologians and philosophers had condemned the practice of magic since the Middle Ages. At the turn of the 15th century, in 1398, the practice of ritual magic was declared heretical by the faculty of theology and detailed in 28 articles; four years later, Jean Gerson published his treatise concerning misconceptions about magical arts, *De erroribus circa artem magicas*, which was used as a reference to condemn witchcraft. Calling demons to serve malevolent human beings was a deep fear in the 13th century, even if the magicians tried to justify their rituals by arguing they were not violating Catholic doctrine with their divination. But it was considered erroneous and sometimes blasphemous. The first trial for witchcraft took place at the Parlement de Paris just after the pronouncement of the 28 articles. There was no word about proper witchcraft or practices to harm people or worship the Devil, only theological justifications. Nevertheless, it provided arguments for sentencing the practices associated with maleficia or pacts with the Devil and inspired many references in the *Malleus Maleficarum*. It was also used in many demonological treatises of the 16th century, especially in Johann Weyer’s *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, where this condemnation of ritual magic is discussed in his final chapter. Jean Bodin reprinted these 28 Latin articles right after his French preface of the *De la Démonomanie des sorciers*, “On the Demon-mania of witches”, published in 1580.

French specificity in witchcraft persecution lies not in number but in gender: male witches represented around half of the cases in the Parlements of Paris and Dijon and 75% in Normandy, while only 30% in Aix en Provence. The area within the Parlement of Paris saw a strong distinction between territories: in the west, 70% of the accused were men, but only 30% in the northeast. Even if there were shepherds among these men who were traditionally associated with magic for healing their herds or flocks, this is not sufficient to explain such an extraordinary proportion of male witches. Some priests have also been accused of being witches too, which is another specificity of France, but the number of such cases cannot justify the figures. The lack of archival material and specific studies leaves this situation mainly unexplained. The priests involved in witchcraft cases were described as magicians or cunning folk “devins”, and some of them were associated with demonic possession affairs which usually affected convents (in 1611 at Aix, in 1634 at Loudin and in 1643 in Louviers).
An early and intense persecution took place in Dauphiné in the 15th century, as an extension of the severe alpine persecution. Preachers combined with ecclesiastical authorities and secular local courts led to more than 300 condemnations between 1420 and 1460, revealing *maleficium* (harmful magic) and diabolic elements. This alpine province saw one of the earliest major witch hunts in Europe documented in archival material such as the *Quintus liber Fachurierorum*, the fifth book of sorcerers, a thick register of more than 1,000 pages of compiled cases from 1424 to 1445. In other sources, 350 witches were accused of witchcraft up to 1511. Most of them were old women (two-third of the 287 suspected witches between 1425 and 1460, and nearly 90% of the accused from the early 16th century). The sentences were severe: in the diocese of Grenoble, 24 out of 29 were sentenced to death, 13 of 16 in the diocese of Gap and three of seven in the diocese of Vienne. In some documented cases, the population and especially the neighbours took a great part in the arrest of the witches, contributing with money and help. Among the accused, there were a minority of wealthy witches (more than 100 florins of estate). The family of the accused witches received permission to have the executions made in secret to protect the honour of the family. Some of these witchcraft cases were conducted by a layman, Claude Tholosan, who claimed to have supervised more than a hundred cases, and who wrote a brief treatise on witchcraft, in which he pins the blame on foreigners who brought this plague to the high mountain valleys. Dauphiné, like Savoy, experienced large numbers of witchcraft trials before the Protestant Reformation but extremely few in the later 16th and 17th centuries. The links between medieval heresy and early witchcraft can be seen here, even if Claude Tholosan did not express it explicitly in order to leave the secular courts sentence the crime of witchcraft.

The Basque country included territories on both sides of the Pyrénées, but research into the persecution of witchcraft in the French part is limited because most archives unfortunately have been lost, unlike in the Spanish part of the country. The situation in Navarre has not been well studied yet. In this land of Inquisition, 410 cases of witchcraft have been counted between 1538 and 1798 as falling under the accusation of *supersticiosos*, which included cunning folk, learned magic and witchcraft. The well-known Great Basque Witch Panic took place on the French side, called *Pays de Labourd*, in 1608. Some nobles, including Tristan de Gamboa d’Alzate, and urban authorities made reciprocal accusations of witchcraft, fighting for local power. Noblemen put the case in the hands of their king, Henri IV, because they were so alarmed that witches had invaded the whole country during the past few years. So, two councillors of the Parlement of Bordeaux, the relevant sovereign judicial court, were sent by royal decree to investigate the case. Pierre de Lancre and Jean d’Espaignet, a president of the Parlement, arrived to interrogate via torture and pronounce the death penalty. They ended their mission before the end of 1609. Because all the original archives were lost, the number of executions is not known: however, eight witches and three priests were burned, prisoners and sent to Bordeaux, where their trials lasted for years. The bishop of Bayonne informed the Spanish bishop of Pamplona of the cases, and the Inquisitor Salazar mentioned in 1612 that more than 80 witches were finally burned during this expedition. The panic was so intense when the French judges arrived that children were kept locked in churches at night to prevent them from being brought to Sabbath. Tristan de Gamboa d’Alzate was the principal instigator of the witch craze and sent many suspected witches behind bars on his sole authority and collaborated closely
with the judges to condemn them. This hysterical episode spread firstly to Spanish villages on the northern side, where the Inquisition imprisoned suspected witches. The second inquisitor of the tribunal came to the French tribunal to get copies of the trials. The accused finally confessed, and the panic then exploded, fuelled by active preachers. An *auto da fé* held in Logrono gathered 30,000 people to see the burning stake. The witch craze follows the same pattern: it starts with children and adolescents dreaming of Sabbath, and then denounces participants once they have been led to confess under torture. In March 1611, no less than 1,946 people confessed or were suspected of witchcraft, which led the Inquisitor General from the Holy Office to declare amnesty for those who gave themselves up at an early stage. Almost 1,400 of them were boys and girls. Salazar could not find any proof of witchcraft after a long investigation, and all current cases were suspended. The calm was restored as suddenly as the panic emerged. The Basque panic is a perfect example of uncontrolled, runaway events that ultimately embarrassed the authorities who tried to correct their errors.

The Burgundy persecution against witches started in 1571, as in other French provinces, and the Parlement of Dijon – which was created in 1537 and almost surrounded by the *ressort* of the Parlement of Paris – showed clemency. A couple of witchcraft trials occurred every year until the 1650s. The local judges sentenced the culprits to death, but the Parlement did not confirm this sentence. Between 1582 and 1650, only 17 people out of 200 accused were executed. In 1635, the Parlement took automatic control over Burgundian local tribunals, and the next year none of the 36 prisoners were executed. A witch craze took place in 1644 when a severe hailstorm and late frost ruined wine and harvests. A local witch finder pretended to identify the witches by looking into their eyes. He launched a panic that ended with over 100 accusations that turned into three confirmed death penalties out of the 15 cases judged locally. This situation provoked a considerable discontent amongst the population, who decided to take the law into their own hands and used the swimming test to find witches. More than nine cases of lynching, sometimes involving several summary executions with the help of local officials, were reported. The Parlement tried to condemn those who defied the law, but only a few were actually sentenced, including one man who was sent to the galley for life because he participated in the lynching of at least 13 witches. Many were sentenced to death in absentia because they escaped. This peculiar situation shows the popular exasperation towards the scepticism and clemency expressed by the Parlement. It also shows the lack of power for imposing control on the population. This is confirmed by the last episode in Burgundy, that of possession in Auxonne: the Ursuline nuns, like their neighbours in Franche-Comté, were afflicted by demonic possession for many years in the 1660s. The Parlement modified the four death penalty sentences by banishing two individuals and releasing two. In addition, the accusation against one of the nuns, Barbe Buvée, placed the royal intendant of Burgundy in a delicate position with regard to the Dijon Parlement, such that the cases ended up in the hands of the Parlement of Paris, which subsequently buried them in the process.

In Languedoc, the Parlement de Toulouse played a very important role in French witch persecution as the second oldest (created in 1443) and largest appellate court. Like that of Paris, the tendency was to reduce punishment for the crime of witchcraft. The activity of this Parlement started with an emblematic case: a woman accused of being a witch was sentenced with perjured evidence and died under extremely harsh torture without having confessed to any crime. Eight
other witches were accused during the same period: three were burned at Millau in 1444, two died before the sentence and three were accused of killing babies and attending Sabbath. The Parlement of Toulouse showed clemency before its Parisian fellow court. In the 1490s, the Parlement did not succeed in stopping six executions in Vivarais or around Nîmes. After a long period of total calm, the Parlement was asked to send commissioners to Bigorre to investigate witchcraft accusations. But the court dismissed the case, calling the accusation “errors and illusions”. In 1562, during the first French War of Religion, the attitude changed, with the condemnation of at least three witches. But this unusual severity did not last, since the following 30 women accused had reduced sentences. During the peak period of witch persecution, it is hard to quantify the intensity because most of the sources are lacking until such time as the local judgements had to be brought to the higher court in Toulouse. Hence, the later series of trials is well studied. In two years between 1643 and 1645, 641 witches were accused, 92% of whom were female. The Parlement managed to reduce the number of executions to 50 or 60, and to arrest some active witch finders who operated in several regions and were condemned to death or to the galleys. Two-thirds of the accused were released and 100 were only banished for one to five years. This witch craze inspired a chapbook titled *Wondrous History of the Witches Sabbath*, printed in 1645, which related the story of a mythical witch finder who allegedly identified 3,000 witches, including his wife. The last episode took place in Bigorre, but this time in 1680. The province of Languedoc saw only a few episodes, aside from the exceptional one of 1643–1645.

The northern province of Normandy is famous for the trial of Joan of Arc in its capital, Rouen, and for its exceptional severity towards male witches. The number of accusations and executions are pretty low in the vast province of Normandy, but the Parlement of Rouen saw almost 400 accusations and about 100 executions of witches, 75% of which defendants were men, between the 1540s and the end of the 17th century. Men also constituted the two-thirds of those executed. The disproportion between male and female witches increased over time, mainly after 1600, to reach the extreme point of the quasi-absence of female accusations in the late 1640s. The stereotype was a shepherd with a complete display of traditional witchcraft, such as toad venom or stolen Eucharists. Another type of witch was also unusually common in Normandy: between 1598 and 1647, not less than 14 priests were punished for witchcraft, with seven burned, six banished and one sent to the galleys. A third model was the blacksmith who harmed and healed horses. If gender is exceptional in Normandy, the chronology is like everywhere else in France: between 1585 and 1610, an average of five trials and one execution per year. There was no panic, no witch finders and no illegal practices such as swimming tests. Even the last wave of possession in convents did not touch the region severely. The only singularity is the persistence of trials after the official Ordinance of 1682. Some shepherds were accused in 1694, in 1703 and even later.

If we consider the present-day borders of France, many regions were outside the frontiers during the witch hunts: Navarre, Savoy, Franche-Comté, Alsace, Lorraine and Spanish Netherlands. The links between these territories and the Kingdom of France are more or less strong, according to the influence and the actual relationship with the French realm. The persecution of witchcraft is therefore very different in terms of insensitvity and pattern.
In Franche-Comté, where the judicial system, with its own Parlement, was not specifically tough against witchcraft at the beginning, persecution was harsh, with more than 800 trials conducted, mainly between 1600 and 1660. In this region, ruled by the Spanish Habsburgs until 1674 when Louis XIV annexed it, the first trials that appeared in the 1430s already showed elements that would become classic, such as flying broomsticks and roasted babies. An ordinance in 1604 imposed capital punishment for witchcraft and enabled a high percentage of death penalty verdicts: 84% for local courts, but this figure is corrected by the appellate court clemency, which reduced it to 53% at the end. The region includes an important witch hunter, Henri Boguet, a judge and a demonologist, who was particularly preoccupied with lycanthropy. This peculiar manifestation of the Devil’s power was already known in the region in the 1520s and underlined by Johann Weyer. Even if fewer than ten trials actually implicated male and female werewolves, these affairs attracted attention from the entirety of Europe.

On the German border, Alsace is a region which came progressively under French authority after 1648. Before that, the region was a scattering of many different entities: a large part of southern Alsace and the northern district of Haguenau – located in northern Alsace – belonged to the Habsburgs, while the prince-bishop of Strasbourg owned a large part of the centre. In addition, Alsace included ten imperial free cities, like Strasbourg, which owned rural villages as well as numerous independent ecclesiastical or noble fiefs. Despite this complete dissemination of authorities, the persecution of witchcraft was active almost everywhere and sometimes with severity. The author of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, Heinrich Kramer, who was born in Sélestat, described witchcraft cases in the 1470s and 1480s. The archival material still needs to be studied, but more than 1,000 witches were executed between 1570 and the 1630s. The towns and villages in the wine-growing piedmont were particularly severe, but the worst executions took place in two Jesuit towns, Sélestat and Molsheim, where respectively 90 and more than 100 witches were trialled in 13 years or five years – the witchcraft cases were recorded there in a special book called *Blutebuch*, the blood-book. The end of the Thirty Year’s War ceased persecution in many territories, too, but not in the those not controlled by the new French authority. Even after the official end of the criminalization of witchcraft, there were some trials conducted, especially in Bergheim.

The southwestern part of the Ardennes belonged to France during the period and was a part of the ressort of the Parlement of Paris and subject to the archbishop of Rheims. This area was characterized by many unofficial lynchings of witches, with an estimated 300 people who were drowned or burned. This is the result of the imposition of Parlement’s attitude, of the Parlement judged too restrained by the local authorities.

The duchy of Lorraine was independent at the time of the witch hunting, but the dukes owed homage to the king of France for half of Bar, while they owed feudal allegiance to the Holy Roman Empire for most of their lands. The French invasion and occupation of Lorraine in the early 1630s saw the end of the very severe witch hunts that affected the duchy. It was one of the worst persecutions against witchcraft of Europe with almost 2,000 trials and more than 1,400 executions from the 1470s to the 1630s. One of the reasons for this very severe persecution was the famous public prosecutor Nicolas Rémy, who published an important demonological manual titled...
the *Daemonolatriae* in 1595. In his experience as the head of the highest court in Lorraine, he claimed he conducted 800 or even 900 trials himself in 15 years of labour. This number is far from being attested in the archives; only 12 cases have been clearly identified as his. But his influence was determinant in the entire jurisdiction and even beyond the limits of the duchy.

Outside the limits of the realm of France, the New France experienced very few cases of witchcraft. This recently and minimally populated colony saw a couple of late accusations that brought attention to the court. In 1658, a man cast a spell on the marriage of his former fiancée by the “nouement d’aiguillette”, tying a knot in a string to cause male impotence. The suspected witch was finally banished and got married later on. The second case concerned another missed marriage: a man is accused of causing the demonic possession of the woman who rejected him. She was exorcised and he was executed. The third case accused a man of harming people, including the woman who refused his advances. He was found guilty, but the appellate court, the Sovereign Council in Quebec, overturned his conviction. The situation was completely different from the one in New England, where 61 trials led to 36 executions. In New France, the unusual gender ratio made clear the accusations against single men who had been disappointed in their attempts to marry.

The French elite considered the crime of witchcraft and its persecution with different opinions. The context of the Wars of Religion and Catholic Reform modified the perception of the Devil’s actions on earth. They still considered that the Devil had the power to harm people and the world, but the elite started to relegate belief in witchcraft into the category of popular superstitions, especially after the scandals of the possession affairs, which put forward zealous witch hunters who managed to sentence to death many accused and even to lynch suspected witches. Scepticism and judicial caution arose until the royal intervention that officially ended the witch hunting. The Ordinance promulgated in 1682 mentioned the now so-called magic, la prétendue magie, which does not deserve death penalty.

**Notes**

13 Soman, *Sorcellerie*.

**Bibliography (selection)**