

WEEK 4 INTRODUCTION TO READINGS

Documents on witchcraft persecutions (1486-1631)

Between about 1560 and about 1670, witch-hunts were common throughout Christian countries, in Catholic and Protestant communities alike. They have been studied in terms of religious change during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation; the spread of state authority into remote local areas; tensions within local communities; changes in thinking about the place of women in society; and new ways of thinking about the place of the poor in society, which in turn led to new conflicts between rich and poor.

In the Holy Roman Empire alone, there were 30,000 trials between 1560 and 1670. And in the area we now call Europe, about 100,000 people were put on trial for witchcraft, of which about 30,000 were executed.

While reading the following selections, keep in mind possible distinctions between what townspeople or peasants thought they were doing when they practiced or accused others of practicing witchcraft, and what state authorities thought they were doing. Historian Richard Horsley has argued: "Left to themselves, the peasants may well have lynched a few suspects—such as the two Austrian women burned for 'causing' a hail storm in 1675—but they would never have produced the great witch hunts in which hundreds of thousands were burned."¹

WEEK 4 QUESTIONS

Documents on witchcraft persecutions

¹ Richard Horsley, "Who Were the Witches? The Social Roles of the Accused in the European Witch Trials," Journal of Interdisciplinary History, vol. 9, no. 4 (Spring 1979), pp. 693-694.

1. Why, according to Bodin, was the persecution of witches vital to state authority?
2. On the basis of these documents, did the persecution of witches also harm state authority?
3. How did the witch-hunts and trials in the town of Bamberg perpetuate themselves?
4. On what grounds did Friedrich Spee, author of the last text, criticize witch-hunting?
5. How well do the texts reflect the information in the table "Witch Trials in Selected Regions"?