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Carine Dunand, Des montagnards endiablés: Chasse aux sorciers dans la vallée de Chamonix (1458-1462)

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Carine Dunand, Des montagnards endiablés: Chasse aux sorciers dans la vallée de Chamonix (1458-1462)

Abstract
For more than twenty years, volumes in the Cahiers Lausannois d’Histoire Médiévale have explored the cases and contexts of early European witch trials in and around the western Alps. They have largely focused on the diocese of Lausanne, but in this volume, Carine Dunand looks slightly further afield, to the Chamonix valley in the shadow of Mont Blanc, which was part of the neighboring diocese of Geneva. She follows the same format as other Cahiers volumes, most of which originated as mémoires de licence in the medieval history seminar at the University of Lausanne: about half the book is a historical study while the rest consists of Latin source editions and facing-page French translations. Thus she makes a solid contribution to our knowledge of late medieval witch trials. Nevertheless, this volume is weaker than many others in the series.

Disciplines
European History | History of Religion | History of Religions of Western Origin | Other Religion | Social History

Comments
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Deliyannis portrays a city with a complex arc of development. Like other western imperial residences, Ravenna began to flourish under the courts of Honorius and Valentinian III, yet it seems to have lacked many standard signs of other fourth- and fifth-century imperial residences, both physical (a circus, a functioning aqueduct) and social (a residential area for the civilian bureaucracy, a local aristocracy—Rome remained the center of elite life in Italy, a dynamic similar to that between, say, New York and Washington, or Sydney and Canberra). Late Roman and Ostrogothic Ravenna was a city built of spolia from the ruins of a previous city center built in the early empire as a naval base. Only in the late Ostrogothic and Byzantine periods were buildings constructed from new materials, locally made bricks and, especially, huge quantities of marble brought at great expense from near Constantinople. This latter material underscores Ravenna’s primary role throughout late antiquity as a conduit from East to West, a mediating position that set the city apart from the rhythms of other western urban regions. Despite the vicissitudes of the fifth and especially the sixth centuries, Ravenna flourished as other western cities shrunk. Many of its major buildings date to periods of general crisis, not stability—felix Ravenna indeed. The Ostrogothic period offers unique monumental evidence of the co-existence of heterodox confessional groups, the “Orthodox” and “Arian” Christian communities: iconographic studies suggest subtle “anti-Arian” discourses, but the historical evidence indicates cooperation between Theoderic and the Orthodox bishop, even during the time of conflict with Pope John I. During the mid-sixth century, Ravenna’s bishops took over from rulers as builders. This development had begun during the later Ostrogothic period and continued through to the end of the century; its chronology appears to have been surprisingly independent of major contemporary events (the Justinianic war, transfer to Byzantine control, and renewed warfare with the Lombards). It coincided with a growing institutional self-awareness of the bishops, similar to that evidenced a century earlier in some other western sees (for example Tours), and included the manufacture of a cult of the supposed founder-bishop, St. Vitalis.

This book is a major contribution, both as a work of reference and as a study in its own right, to art historical scholarship and the wider study of late antiquity. Its scholarly rigor does not obscure a strong affection for the beauty of its subject; on a change in style from the fifth to sixth centuries: “the taste for gold mosaic as a background completely changes the visual experience from one of mournful contemplation [as in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia] to one of brightness and splendour” (196).

Andrew Gillett, Macquarie University


For more than twenty years, volumes in the Cahiers Lausannois d’Histoire Médiévale have explored the cases and contexts of early European witch trials in and around the western Alps. They have largely focused on the diocese of Lausanne, but in this volume, Carine Dunand looks slightly further afield, to the Chamonix valley in the shadow of Mont Blanc, which was part of the neighboring diocese of Geneva. She follows the same format as other Cahiers volumes, most of which originated as mémoires de licence in the medieval history seminar at the University of Lausanne: about half the book is a historical study while the rest consists of Latin source editions and facing-page French translations. Thus she makes a solid contribution to our knowledge of late medieval witch trials. Nevertheless, this volume is weaker than many others in the series.
The trials Dunand examines involved at least thirteen accused: four women were burned in 1458, although only two of the cases are well documented; another woman was executed in 1459; one man was brought into court in late 1458 but was eventually freed in 1459; and finally four women and four men were executed in 1462. Dunand situates these trials within several contexts, the most fully developed being that of local politics of the Chamonix valley. For centuries the valley had been under the control of its Benedictine priory, and during the period of these trials was under the lordship of prior Guillaume de Ravoirer, scion of one of the most powerful Genevan families of the period. Yet over the years, the people of the valley had also developed numerous privileges and liberties, assiduously guarded in the fifteenth century by five syndics. Local government operated smoothly when the priory and its officials worked in conjunction with these men, but Dunand stresses a long history of tension and conflict between the priory and the commune, of which the mid-fifteenth century witch trials are exemplary.

The two well-documented trials of 1458 serve as models of cooperation. Both of the old women accused appear to have been generally suspect, and commune and priory officials worked together to see them quickly burned. The 1459 case was more problematic, showing strain between priory and commune and dragging on somewhat longer, although still resulting in execution. The case of Jean Corteys, arrested in 1458 but ultimately set free, represents for Dunand a major turning point. Corteys was a significant peasant landholder in the valley, and he marshaled considerable support from his fellow Chamoniards, many of whom testified in his defense. He was also able to use his resources to get his case heard in Geneva, where he was ultimately exonerated. Lastly, the trials of 1462 are presented as exemplifying major discord between commune and priory. One of the victims was in fact the wife of a syndic.

There is some minor chronological sleight-of-hand in presenting the Corteys case as a distinct turning point, in that it actually took place as the other 1458/59 trials were unfolding, not in their aftermath, but that is a quibble. A more serious problem with Dunand’s analysis of the different unfolding of these cases as an indication of developing local political strife is that she completely ignores the obvious component of gender. All the accused of 1458/59 who ended at the stake were women, while Jean Corteys was a man, and a man of some substance. This does not negate Dunand’s political analysis, but she absolutely should have taken it into account.

By the time of the 1462 trials, two other contexts had come into play. Ideas of the witches’ sabbath, first articulated in sources dating from the 1430s, had clearly made their way into the imagination of the regions’ courts, figuring significantly in the 1462 trials. Also, while previously the diocese of Geneva had been served by inquisitors based in the Dominican convent in Lausanne, in 1460 a separate inquisition based in Geneva took over, one eager to prove its zeal, in Dunand’s estimation, by its diligent prosecution of witches. Both of these are obviously extremely important developments in terms of shaping the character of the 1462 trials, but neither is treated with sufficient detail relative to the political situation. The role of inquisitors and conceptions of the witches’ sabbath in early trials have been well studied in other contexts, and perhaps extended treatment here would only have reiterated their conclusions, but the absence of such treatment means that the particular interaction of these developments with local tensions in the Chamonix valley remains somewhat obscure.

Despite these shortcomings, however, this book adds another piece to the jigsaw puzzle of early witch trials in western Alpine lands. While most of the texts Dunand uses were already edited in a late-nineteenth-century collection of documents relating to the priory of Chamonix, she has added a few more archival documents to the record. Her new editions
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**Reviews**


This book is a significant contribution to the ethnic history of Southeastern Europe. Danijel Dzino pursues, within the particular area of Dalmatia, the lines of research opened by Florin Curta’s critique of the migrationist paradigm according to which wide masses of Slavs dispersed from a common homeland during the sixth and seventh centuries. Dzino deconstructs the concept of ethnicity as suggesting a group’s common cultural tradition, language, and identity, and he provides instead a study of the way identity itself was constructed through observable practices forming a cultural *habitus*. Such an approach is highly valuable in an area where primordialist views of ethnicity have been connected to territorial disputes and ethnic tension. Dzino uses the recent work of Croat scholars—Ivo Goldstein, Neven Budak, and particularly Mladen Ančić, whose thesis that Croat identity crystallized in a Carolingian context he elaborates—and presents a synthesis of archaeological data and textual critique of narrative sources that offers an escape from ongoing disputes whether Croats were Slavs or not, autochthonous population or immigrants, or whether there were ethnic differences between coast and hinterland. Through positing the constructed character of identity, the author suggests that ethnic groups do not exist by default and that the value of ethnic identity is contingent upon existing social structures.

The book is divided into eight chapters, beginning with “deconstructive” and ending with “constructive,” two approaches that connect in the sixth chapter. The much larger “deconstructive” part opens with a discussion of modern-era perceptions of the earliest times of Croat history, focusing on Franjo Rački’s view that the Croats settled in a deserted land, a view that held sway in the historical imagination until the later twentieth century. Chapter 2 is a crisp critical survey of modern scholarship of early Croat history and the elaboration of Dzino’s analytical framework around Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*—understood as “durable disposition towards certain common sense everyday perceptions and social practices” (35). The third chapter deconstructs the imagined ethnic unity of the Illyrians who populated the Western Balkans in antiquity by building a complex picture of ethnic, regional, political, and religious identities in the Roman world. We are then, in chapter 4, presented with the contradictory data about the sequence of events and observable historical processes in Dalmatia after the decline of Roman power, while chapter 5 argues convincingly how unusable the narrative sources for the early medieval history of the region—the *Chronicle of the Priest of Dioclea*, the *Historia Salonitana* and Constantine VII’s *De administrando imperio*—are for the discussion of ethnic identities. Finally, the sixth chapter surveys Croatian early medieval archeology and extracts the data accumulated in excavated cemeteries from the “culture-history” (37 and following) paradigms that prompted archeologists to look for chronologically sequent and clearly distinct layers. In this chapter Dzino formulates his main thesis: instead of looking for the turning-point in time when a change in burial practices might bespeak the “arrival” of the Slavs, we should interpret the evidence—row cemeteries, alternate practices of inhumation and cremation, presence or absence of grave goods, etc.—against the background of similarly diversified contemporary burial material from Britain and Gaul. Varied burial