

2006

Council of Basel

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Council of Basel

Abstract

The Council of Basel (1431-1449) played a unique and important role as a center for the development and diffusion of the idea of witchcraft in Western Europe. The full stereotype of witchcraft, entailing not just harmful sorcery (maleficium) but also demonic invocation and devil worship, heretical gatherings, and apostasy, emerged in a clear form only in the first decades of the fifteenth century, and some of the earliest recorded witch hunts took place during these years in lands just south of Basel, in the diocese of Geneva, Lausanne, and Sion. Politically, most of these regions were under the dominance of the ducal house of Savoy, which enjoyed close connections to the council, to the extent that the council fathers elected its duke, Amadeus VIII (1383-1451; ruled 1416-1451), as anti-pope Felix V in 1439 (reigned 1439-1449). Given these proximities, and considering that Basel brought together a large number of churchmen from across Europe, it is perhaps not surprising that the council became a major center for the collection and codification of the new ideas of witchcraft emerging in the lands around the western Alps and the transmission of these ideas to the rest of Europe.

Disciplines

European History | History of Religion | Medieval History | Other History

Comments

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became a professor at the University of Łódź, where he taught until 1985. In 1988 he was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Łódź.

Baranowski estimated a total of 10,000 legally passed death sentences and 5,000 illegal deaths of both men and women (Baranowski 1952, 178). He based these figures on the territorial unit of Poland in 1952 (without Silesia), and reckoned 1,250 towns in Poland. He supposed that each town court tried an average of four cases for witchcraft during the period and sentenced two people to death from each trial. He then added to this figure of 10,000 death sentences, an arbitrary 5,000 deaths to reflect the illegal murders of people suspected of witchcraft, making a total of 15,000 deaths over the three centuries. In his opinion the peak of the persecution was between 1675 and 1725 (Baranowski 1952, 179), an opinion that has been borne out by other research. In 1963, Baranowski revised his figures down to a few thousand in the epilogue to the Polish translation of Kurt Baschwitz's work on witchcraft, *Czarownice* (Witches). Unfortunately, these more accurate figures have not been those usually quoted by subsequent historians.

Doubts have been expressed about the veracity of the original and much-cited figures, and they have not always been considered in the context of the varying geography of early modern Poland, which was substantially different from the postwar territorial boundaries of 1945. Despite the controversy over statistics, Baranowski's works provided references to many primary sources, and provided a good introduction to the subject. The majority of his references have been checked, but many was clearly inaccurate (Pilaszek 1998, 82). In short, Baranowski's conclusions in his main work was fine, but the statistics was not.

Baranowski adopted a multicausal approach to explaining the reasons for outbreaks of witchcraft trials. He saw them as the result of German influence, because the persecution appeared to have started earlier in the lands neighboring the German territories, and a German legal code, the Magdeburg Law, was used in many Polish towns. He also regarded the Roman Catholic Church as partially to blame. At the same time, Baranowski saw socioeconomic reasons behind the trials: He interpreted witchcraft as a means of revenge employed by otherwise powerless peasants against their masters.

Baranowski also published a collection of transcriptions of six trials for witchcraft from Kalisz between 1580 and 1616, as well as an article on a trial for love magic from Praszka and many other works on folklore and peasant culture in Poland. His work represented the first attempt to present a comprehensive portrait of the phenomenon of witchcraft persecution in Poland and as such remains the natural starting point for further research—especially if Polish and foreign

scholars use his revised estimates of 1963 rather than his pioneering estimates of 1952.

WANDA WYPORSKA

See also: POLAND; POZNAŃ; SILESIA.

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BASEL, COUNCIL OF

The Council of Basel (1431–1449) played a unique and important role as a center for the development and diffusion of the idea of witchcraft in Western Europe. The full stereotype of witchcraft, entailing not just harmful sorcery (*maleficium*) but also demonic invocation and devil worship, heretical gatherings, and apostasy, emerged in a clear form only in the first decades of the fifteenth century, and some of the earliest recorded witch hunts took place during these years in lands just south of Basel, in the diocese of Geneva, Lausanne, and Sion. Politically, most of these regions were under the dominance of the ducal house of Savoy, which enjoyed close connections to the council, to the extent that the council fathers elected its duke, Amadeus VIII (1383–1451; ruled 1416–1451), as anti-pope Felix V in 1439 (reigned 1439–1449). Given these proximities, and considering that Basel brought together a large number of churchmen from across Europe, it is perhaps not surprising that the council became a major center for the collection and codification of the new ideas of witchcraft emerging in the lands around the western Alps and the transmission of these ideas to the rest of Europe.

Several clerical theorists of witchcraft either attended the Council of Basel or were closely associated with the assembly in some way. Perhaps the most important of these men was the Dominican theologian Johannes Nider, whose long work *Formicarius* (The Anthill) contained the most extensive early accounts of witchcraft written by an ecclesiastical authority. Nider was an important member of this council from its inception until late 1434 or early 1435. Although he wrote the *Formicarius* after his departure from Basel, mainly in

1437 and early 1438 while he was in Vienna as a member of the university faculty, most of his accounts of witchcraft were set in regions of the western Alps, and he clearly collected these stories during his time in Basel. Another important author, Martin Le Franc, came to Basel as the secretary of Amadeus VIII (later Felix V) of Savoy, and was formally incorporated into the council in 1440. From 1440 to 1442, he wrote the long poem *Le Champion des Dames* (The Defender of Ladies), which contained an extended debate about witchcraft, here set in the context of the late medieval *querelle des femmes* (debate about the nature of women). Yet another critical early source on witchcraft, written probably in the mid-1430s, was the brief tract entitled *Errores Gazariorum* (Errors of the Gazars or *Gazarii* [Cathars—a common term for heretics and later for witches]). Although the author of this work remains unknown, its connection in some fashion to the Council of Basel appears strong, as both known manuscript copies of the tract exist within larger collections of material relating to the council.

In addition to theorists, several important persecutors of witches were present at the Council of Basel or, again, connected to the synod in some way. George de Saluces, bishop of Lausanne from 1440 to 1461, under whose overall direction numerous witchcraft trials were conducted, was present at Basel, and Ulrich de Torrenté, the diocesan inquisitor of Lausanne from the 1420s who actually conducted many of these early trials, may have spent time at the council. The most famous persecutor of witches to emerge from Basel, however, was Nicolas Jacquier, who attended the council from 1433 to 1440. Later, as an inquisitor in northern France, he wrote an important treatise on witchcraft, *Flagellum hereticorum fascinariorum* (Scourge of Heretical Witches), in 1458.

Despite much circumstantial evidence that Basel was an important crossroads for the development and transmission of the idea of witchcraft, there is no evidence whatsoever that matters of witchcraft or sorcery were ever a formal concern of the council. Although Basel dealt extensively with the Hussite heresy, and even to some extent with the heresy of the free spirit, there is no record of even a single session being devoted to the problem of heretical sorcerers or supposed cults of witches. Nevertheless, at least some direct evidence shows that informal discussions of witchcraft were certainly taking place there. The story of Joan of Arc, burned at the stake the year the council began, was carried to Basel by delegates from the University of Paris. At the council, Johannes Nider heard the story, and, although charges of sorcery did not actually figure in Joan's final condemnation, Nider included her supposed traffic with demons in his *Formicarius* as an example of witchcraft.

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See also: *ERRORES GAZARIORUM*; EUGENIUS IV; HERESY; HUSSITES; JACQUIER, NICOLAS; JOAN OF ARC; LAUSANNE, DIOCESE OF; LE FRANC, MARTIN; NIDER, JOHANNES; ORIGINS OF THE WITCH HUNTS; SWITZERLAND, TORRENTÉ, ULRIC DE.

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BASQUE COUNTRY

Basque country includes the Basque-speaking areas near the Bay of Biscay on both sides of the Pyrenees—the French department of Pyrénées-Atlantique and the Spanish Basque provinces and Navarre. Despite the central position of the Basque witchcraft trials in the history of European witch persecution, no scholarly overview of the subject exists. In particular, knowledge of the trials in the French Basque country is limited, because most archives have been lost. In the Spanish Basque country they have been preserved to a great extent, but remain far from adequately researched. The situation is best in Navarre, where material has been preserved from all three courts that prosecuted witches: the High Court of Navarre, the Pamplona Bishop's Court for Navarre with part of Guipúzcoa, and the tribunal of the Inquisition at Logroño, with jurisdiction that included all of the Spanish Basque country. The archives of the last of these courts were lost during the Napoleonic Wars, but its documents have been preserved in summary form in the so-called *relaciones de causas* (reports of cases) sent annually to the *Suprema* (Supreme Council of the Spanish Inquisition), now preserved at the Archivo Histórico Nacional in Madrid.

Inquisition sources for Navarre and the Basque provinces mention 410 cases between 1538 and 1798 against *supersticiosos*, which was the overall term used by the Holy Office for a wide range of “magical delinquents” from cunning folk, male and female (*hechiceros* and *hechiceras*) and learned magicians (*nigromantes*) to witches proper, male and female (*brujos* and *brujas*) (Henningesen 1993, 58, 71 ff.; Moreno Garbayo 1977, 117 ff.). Records also remain of several hundred cases from secular courts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and a score of cases prosecuted at the bishop's court in Pamplona between 1589 and 1728. From the latter two courts records also exist of several “witchcraft countersuits,” i.e., libel cases dealing with accusations of witchcraft or cases against witch hunters for assaulting innocent people. In the wake of the great Basque witch persecution of 1609–1611 the High Court of