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Seventeenth Century Persecution of Sorcery and Witches in the High North

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When persecuting those accused of some kind of witchcraft and magic in the Nordic countries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the crime they allegedly had committed was labelled *trolldom* (sorcery). The correct historical legal term for the criminal was therefore *trollkvinne* (sorceress) and *trollmann* (sorcerer) respectively – *trollfolk* (sorcerers) in the plural. The modern German umbrella term *hexe* (witch) was first introduced in Denmark-Norway, Iceland and Sweden-Finland towards the very end of the seventeenth century and is thus not used in any legislation against sorcery-related practices, and very seldom used in the trial accounts. The Nordic distinction between *trolldom* and *hekseri* can in other words be compared to the English distinction between sorcery and witchcraft. However, in all the Nordic countries they continued using the old word for the crime instead of adapting the modern word of witchcraft even during the early modern period. In German speaking countries the new word for the crime was *Hexerei*, which gradually, but not entirely, replaced the old word of *Zauberei* and focused on the devil's pact: "...einem Pakt mit dem Teufel".¹

In old legal documents from the Nordic countries, sorcerers, or trolls as they are popularly referred to, are described as beings that people should not get in touch with. For example, the ancient Norwegian Christian statutes from the eleventh and twelfth centuries contain a clear ban on consulting such trolls or seeking knowledge from them. Furthermore, in Norway's and Iceland's first land laws from 1274 and 1281 respectively such encounter was perceived as a very serious breach of law that carried the strictest penalty. The law forbids anyone to, "sit outside to wake up trolls".² In the text below, I am, however, comfortable by using the words

¹ The German historian Johannes Dillinger call the new term "Der elaborierte Hexereibegriff", see Dillinger 2007 pp. 19–23 and Dillinger 2013 pp. 53–54.

² Knutsen & Riisøy 2007 p. 64 and Mitchell 2011 p. 21 and p. 214.

witch and *witchcraft* without regard to the historical and legal definition of the crime in early modern Nordic countries.

My text is about the massive and intense witch-hunting in the far north. Compared to the size of the population the northeastern county of Denmark-Norway, Finnmark, experienced one of the largest and severe witch persecution in Europe during the seventeenth century. This story is about the content and context of these particular witch trials, what happened, how did it all begin and what kind of people were involved, both as witch hunters and as so-called *trollfolk*? A special focus will be placed on the complex multiethnic situation in the area, and the involvement and influence of ethnic groups in this kind of persecution.

Witch-Hunting in Norway

In proportion to its population of approximately 440,000 in 1665, a relatively large number of Norwegians were prosecuted for witchcraft. From the 1560s until the beginning of the eighteenth century more than 750 named men and women were formally accused of breaches of the Danish-Norwegian laws against sorcery. About 310 of these were sentenced to death, 80 % being women. Stricter penalties were usually imposed on women than men. It is worth noting that these statistics are based on cases for which we have documentary evidence; the legal archives of the seventeenth century are inadequate for several Norwegian areas and regions. It may come as no surprise that those counties which top the list of most witch-trials, Finnmark in the northeast and Rogaland in the southwest, are also the counties with best preserved judicial court records from the seventeenth century.³

Norwegian witchcraft trials began around 1560, with the most intense period of prosecution lasting from about 1620 until 1665. The frequency of cases gradually decreased towards the end of the seventeenth century. The last death sentence was imposed in Kvæfjord in the county of Troms in 1695. According the archival documents from the case, a woman by the name of Johanne Nielsdatter had renounced God, her holy baptism, and Christianity and had surrendered herself to the devil. She was receiving diabolical assistance and strength from a demon called Knut, who acted as a personal servant. Johanne confessed to having caused the death of four persons and injured the health and limbs of a number of others by means of witchcraft. In addition, she was said to have perpetrated many evil deeds by various means. The judgement of 14 November 1695 decreed that Johanne was to be thrown alive into the flames and burnt to death. The court based its legal authority for the prosecution on Article

³ Næss 2006 p. 838 and Næss 2014 p. 362.

nine of the first chapter of King Christian V's Norwegian law of 1687. Johanne is thus among the very few sorcerers in Norway who were sentenced on the basis of that judicial code.⁴

Although several people were sentenced through strict sorcery laws in the late sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries, most of those in Norway were tried under the main Danish-Norwegian laws against sorcery that came into force in the October of 1617. The regulations were put into effect by King Christian IV, partly to mark the Protestant state Church's celebration of the one hundred-year anniversary of Martin Luther's publication of his 95 theses against contemporary Catholic ideas and practices. The 1617-celebration with its moral law codes also marks the beginning of the second phase of reformation with its emphasis on Lutheran orthodoxy, biblicism, and confessionalisation in Denmark-Norway. As was the case throughout Denmark, the number of witchcraft trials increased in parts of Norway, particularly in the Østland area in the east, during the period 1619–25.⁵ The regulations differentiated between various types of witchcraft criminality. Making a pact with the devil was the worst offence and should be given death penalty. The devil's pact constituted a proper witch in Denmark-Norway at the time. Those who practised benevolent magic, so-called *signere* (healers and "white" witches), were punished with fines and banishment. The main point is that all of them were labelled *trollfolk*. The clients of these sorcerers, defined as *medvitere* (accomplices), were also punished under the 1617-law with milder penalties. Almost one third of Norwegian sorcerers were convicted on the basis of accusations that identified them as either *signere* or *medvitere*.

“Gondols ondu” and the Lapland Witches

A trial was conducted against a woman called Ragnhild Tregagaas, according to the single Norwegian charter of the Late Middle Ages that deals with magic, witchcraft, and diabolism. The trial is also «the first documented case of witchcraft to take place in the Nordic world».⁶ According to the documents, Ragnhild was found guilty of a number of serious offences: love spells, incest or illicit sexual relationships, extramarital intercourse and for having conjured impotence by black magic. Her case is relevant in the north context due the focus on the special kind of magic called “spirits of Gandul”, supposedly used to inflict a number of serious offences.

⁴ Hagen 2014 p. 385.

⁵ Johansen 2006 p. 266; Kallestrup 2009 pp. 86–87; Knutsen 2003 p. 193 and Næss 2014 p. 364.

⁶ Mitchell 2011 p. 169.

The 1325 case against Ragnhild contains several interesting aspects. It was treated more like a heresy case than a witchcraft case. The context suggests that the difference between the two sins was not clearly defined during the Late Middle Ages in Norway, like anywhere else in Europe at the time. In Europe, and especially in papal Avignon, at the early fourteenth century there was a learned discussion going on among canon lawyers and theologians about how to define harmful sorcery and magical rites. Even though magical rituals as actions were not considered to be a kind of heresy, it was declared by many that magical actions entailed an underlying heretical belief.⁷

In the Latin text from the 1325-case, the medieval Norwegian law codes from 1274–76 on *trolldom* and trolls are not referred to. Furthermore, words like *trolldom* or magic are not mentioned at all in the account. In fact, there is not a single surviving concrete criminal case from Norway during the medieval times in which *trolldom* or *trollfolk*, are explicitly mentioned. On the other hand, the word *gondols* (*Gandul*) mentioned in Ragnhild's loathsome curse is of interest. *Gondols* is a word derived from *gand* or *gandr* which refer to a kind of demonic spirit (*diabolicus gandus*) or magically projectile know from early modern witchcraft trials in Norway, especially from the extreme north when the native Sami people are involved in these kind of persecutions.⁸

From the thirteenth century on the witches of Lapland were known all over Europe to cast their evil spells across vast distances. In fact, such spells could be carried upon the northern winds and result in illnesses among people far to the South in Europe. Shootings, or the conjuring of spells “on the wind”, were a well-known malevolent magic across most of northern Scandinavia. The “gand” was imagined to be something physical. The shooting of “lap shot” was perceived as small leaden darts, which the Sami could shoot across great distances. The Swedish, Catholic exile bishop Olaus Magnus (1490–1557), for instance, spoke of this kind of spell as small leaden arrows, at the middle of the sixteenth century. The Norwegian parish priest, Petter Dass (1646/47–1707), described the Sami spell as vile, dark blue flies – otherwise known as Beelzebub's flies – at the end of the seventeenth century. Historical court records, from north Norwegian witch trials, offer specific descriptions and actual illustrations of the Sami's *gand*. One of the passages even mentions that the *gand* resembles a mouse with heads at both front and rear. Consequently, the Sami were known to bewitch by casting spells upon people. This kind of spell casting is the kind of bewitching that

⁷ Bailey 2013 pp. 78–79.

⁸ Heide 2006 pp. 34–35.

is reported upon in the Sami sorcery trials of seventeenth century. However, the use of gands is not exclusively related to the indigenous people of Northern Europe.⁹

In the 1325-case against Ragnhild Tregagaas the expression *gondols ondu* could mean the spirits connected to this kind of gands shooting. From a long distance when cast out these spirits were supposed to bite, scratch, or otherwise harm the victim of the curse. The case against Ragnhild also supports the proposition that women were more likely than men to be put on trial for using some very special kinds of sex and love magic. This is especially true when considering magical curses intended to break up relationships and make married couples unable to have sex.¹⁰ In the words of the American scholar Stephen Mitchell: “Other notorious witch trials from the later Scandinavian Middle Ages generally focus on sex, love, and more sex, but always in the context of love triangles where passions of the heart are clearly at the forefront”.¹¹ In this case Ragnhild Tregagaas had used impotence magic to prevent her lover from having sex and, consequently, from consummating his marriage with another woman.

Ragnhild Tregagaas is the only person we know of from medieval Norway who was charged and convicted for conjuring magic – more than 250 years before the witch-hunts started in Norway, and then with an entirely different intensity and brutality than expressed by the 1325 conviction. The seriousness of her magical curses was evident, but in 1325 there were little signs of the stereotype evil, satanic witch of early modern demonology. This long-term transition in dealing with cases like this is related to different kinds of developments in demonology and turning witchcraft to a secular crime to be conducted by secular courts. This 1325 case from Norway has obviously similarities with later witch trials and demonology, not at least when it comes to the devil pact as essential for all kinds of effective magic. Indeed, Tregagaas’ story and confession come very close to pact-witchcraft. However, in the late medieval period, cases like this often mixed heresy, diabolism and magic that is not connected in any clear way to early modern trials for diabolic magic. This case from the fourteenth century is important for throwing some light on the essential shift from heresy via sorcery (or *trolldom*) to demonic magic, and for its central focus on this special kind of gands shooting, which is a fundamental topic for the representations of Sami sorcery.

Witch Hunting in the county of Finnmark

⁹ Hagen 2014 pp. 148–151.

¹⁰ Rider 2012 pp. 191, 197.

¹¹ Mitchell 1997a p. 85.

The early modern witch trials in Norway were unevenly distributed geographically. As in other places in Europe, one region might experience extensive prosecution while the neighbouring region had almost no experience at all of witch-hunts. The number of trials in the towns was proportionately higher than the size of the urban population throughout the kingdom, and was particularly high in Stavanger and Bergen. Persecution in Bergen, the country's largest town at the time, began very early: there were at least 16 cases in the town even before the beginning of the seventeenth century. In addition, the confessions in the Bergen cases reflected elements of learned witchcraft beliefs, such as pacts with the devil, witches' gathering, and shapeshifting.¹²

Finmark stands out among the counties, both for the scope of its prosecutions and their brutality. With a population of 3,200 Norwegians and Sami people towards the end of the seventeenth century, more than ninety people were executed for witchcraft over the course of about sixty years. The entire territory of sparsely populated northern Norway had a total of more than 40 % of the recorded death sentences for the entire country. In male-dominated fishing communities such as Vadsø and Vardø, the prosecutions developed into panics and matched some the most terrible witch-hunts on the Continent in intensity. In the worst cases, the trials exterminated quite a few of the female population in some of the small fishing villages. Moreover, notions of diabolism appeared in many of the confessions.¹³

Figure 1: The numbers of Witch-Trials in Arctic Norway 1593–1695:

Gender and Ethnicity	Nordland	Troms	Finmark	Total
Sami women	1 (1)	2 (2)	8 (5)	11 (8)
Sami men	2 (2)	5 (5)	19 (13)	26 (20)
Norwegian women	10 (7)	7 (7)	103 (73)	120 (87)
Norwegian men	5 (3)	1 (1)	8 (1)	14 (5)
Unknown	6 (6)	-	-	6 (6)
Total witch-trials	24 (19)	15 (15)	138 (92)	177 (126)

This figure displays the total number of witch-trials in the three present-day northern Norwegian counties, from 1593–1695, distributed between gender and ethnic background. The parenthesis shows the numbers of death sentences. The figure pertains to indicted individuals in actual witch-trials and does not include cases of slander, even though these might have elements of witchcraft.

The water ordeal was used in approximately thirty of these cases, whereas this dubious legal procedure is known to have occurred in only a few Norwegian cases outside Finmark.

¹² Botheim 1999/2000.

¹³ For an overview, see Hagen 2015 and Willumsen 2010.

The strong trading link between coastal Finnmark and Bergen in the early modern period greatly facilitated the transmission of witch beliefs and there is a clear correlation between cases involving diabolism in Bergen at the end of the sixteenth century and the first large, chain-reaction witch-hunts in Finnmark around 1621. One special feature of the prosecutions in the northern part of Norway was the presence of indigenous people among those tried. As indicated, most of the people burnt were Norwegian coastal women, and one-fifth of the total belonged to the Sami indigenous group. Among Sami convicted of sorcery men are in the majority (see Figure 1). The male dominance among what is sometime called Sami shamans convicted of sorcery seems to be a general trait all over Europe. On the other hand, it has been suggested that scholarly discussion and description of shamanism have tended to marginalise and down play the roles of women as shamans of a special kind.¹⁴

The regional policy of the county governors

There is no place along the coast of Norway during the seventeenth century where the Danish state maintained so strong a presence as in Finnmark. With the region's unsettled borders to the east and different ethnical groups in religious borderland, the governorship in Finnmark was acknowledged to be more difficult and demanding than that of other counties in Norway. County governors played an important role in making local authority effective in policing of borders. One of the reasons for this strong influence of central power on this local level can be found in the county governors' way of ruling the county.

Early modern Finnmark played a special political role in the dual monarchy. The overall political goal was to defend and to expand the territory of the realm. The King's men at the northern borderlands with overlapping taxation, areas and zones had to carry out a kind of command economy. However, as long as they took care of the king's demands for territorial integration and fought local resistance against such demands, the social and political elite of the county could maintain a strong position for themselves. We could in fact speak of kind of mercantilism in which the local elite, as the link between centre and province, enjoyed far-reaching internal autonomy. In other words, they could very well exercise much more zeal in prosecuting "internal outsiders" than the central authorities. Left to their own devices they could execute dangerous and suspicious people as a kind of career strategy strengthening their own authority and political power. In fact, centrally placed persons in the local power system like county governors, bailiffs and county court judges appear to have considered themselves

¹⁴ Dubois 2011 p. 106.

as some kind of moral entrepreneurs and crusading reformers at the very frontiers of the European civilisation as described by the German historian Wolfgang Behringer.¹⁵

It has been rumoured that King Christian IV appointed county governors in northern Norway to hunt down witches and prevent the spread of witchcraft in the regions. A diabolic plot among border men and internal outsiders to undermine local political authority, social stability and religious unity had been discovered. Therefore, the King ordered the county governors to undertake aims to ensure that God-abiding citizens would not fear settling this region because of Sami sorcery. The Danish-Norwegian king was apparently pleased with how readily his men fulfilled their mission of launching a crackdown against, first, the external threat of Swedish and Russian plans to fulfil their expansion into Finnmark and, second, towards evil Sami men with strong frontiers ties, and then evil Norwegian women understood as witches in their midst. In the words of the Danish historian Jens C. V. Johansen: “At the same time, the Danish king struck at the external as well as the internal enemies of the Danish-Norwegian kingdom”.¹⁶ Reports of witch gatherings could be interpreted as sublimated forms of social revolt and some sort of a secret society of women's groups organised in military-like units under the governorship of Satan himself. This threatened the male patriarchy, Lutheran orthodoxy and the fragile local power structure, who took their authority from God. Confessions abounded, too, of how the Devil offered the accused witches a better life. This could easily be seen as a way of obtaining power and freedom from economic marginalisation and the overturn of local governmental authority.

An important part of the integrating role of the church was to internalise new norms and values associated with Lutheran orthodoxy. The importance of Protestant apocalyptic history thinking, with its belief that the world was in its Last Days, in giving urgency to the prosecution of witches, should be emphasized in this context. A widespread fear of collective spread of God’s wrath was among the intellectual strains behind this kind of persecution and cleansing process. The strict control of Christian good and evil led to charges and sentences of sorcery and witchcraft, which were not only motivated by clerical or religious factors, but also by the religious ignorance of the people. The concept of devilish fifth columnists and saboteurs in its midst, both among Sami men and Norwegian women, resulted in a witch-hunt for internal enemies that was without parallel in the early modern history of Denmark and Norway. As in many other places, the witch figure in the high north of Europe could be perceived as a social and cultural construct, one that was created by conflict in the

¹⁵ Behringer 2004 p. 163.

¹⁶ Johansen 2006, Vol. 1, p. 186.

neighbourhood and the cumulative notion of witchcraft that had gained currency among the intellectuals in Denmark-Norway from the end of the sixteenth century and during the seventeenth century.¹⁷

In my own research, I have studied different aspects of the development of witchcraft trials throughout northern Norway, especially in Finnmark. By using a local centre-periphery model, with central political administrative functions in the east and west Finnmark on the periphery, I have studied key variables, such as gender and ethnicity, in the data (see, Figure 2). For example, west Finnmark appears as one of the few regions in Europe with a majority of men among those persecuted for sorcery, with the Sami people accounting for the large number of male witches. With regard to the preponderance of Norwegian coastal women in eastern part of Finnmark accused of witchcraft, I have interpreted the trials with an underlying effort to demonise rebellious women and destroy potentially dangerous networks among women in the fishing communities.¹⁸

Figure 2: People convicted of witchcraft in western and eastern Finnmark, 1593-1692

Gender and ethnic background	West Finnmark	East Finnmark	Finnmark
Sami women	4 (2)	4 (3)	8 (5)
Sami men	14 (11)	5 (2)	19 (13)
Norwegian women	6 (3)	97 (70)	103 (73)
Norwegian men	2 (0)	6 (1)	8 (1)
Total	26 (16)	112 (76)	138 (92)

As the figure 2 shows, it might appear as though Satan’s powers declined considerably once a person crossed Porsangerfjorden, the border area between eastern and western Finnmark in the seventeenth century. Notice in particular the strong dominance of women in the East, while there is a small predominance or majority of Sami men among those convicted of witchcraft in the West. The numbers in parenthesis show the level of death sentences.

Diabolism as a key issue

In the historiography of witchcraft it has been said that in states such as Norway the crime essentially entailed performing harmful magic (maleficium). In peripheral regions, the witches were not accused of worshipping the Devil, because ideas of diabolism and demonological conceptions had not penetrated these regions in the outskirts of Europe. However, in spite of not only being in the outskirts of Europe but also in the peripheral region of Norway, Finnmark does not fit into this larger European centre-periphery model. As

¹⁷ In his book on Anne Pedersdatter Nils Gilje has used the most famous Norwegian witchcraft case from Bergen in 1590 to provide a deeper understanding of the intellectual and religious foundations of the trials, see Gilje 2003 pp. 247–248.

¹⁸ Hagen 2015 pp. 54–55.

indicated, there was a very strong demonological influence on the witch-trials in this part of Norway. Most of the female witches of Finnmark were accused of some kinds of dealings with the Devil and his demons.

The witchcraft prosecutions in Finnmark were conducted in the local courts. These courts who held one to three sessions each year at each fishing community along the coast, were allowed to operate without much interference from higher courts, and they remained largely beyond central judicial control. The persecution of witches can be seen as essentially directed from these local authorities. The witches were usually convicted by the county court judge together with a jury of laymen. The county judges, many of them ordinary people from the fishing communities and with little education, were certainly preoccupied with diabolic fantasies. The local magistrates living in the same community as the accused witches, did give greater importance to the Satanic pact and the witches' Sabbath than did their counterparts in many other parts of Norway. Witchcraft was not so much an ambiguous term in early modern Finnmark as in other parts of Europe at this time. Witchcraft represented a diabolic anti-society founded on people, mostly women, who stood for disobedience and rebellion against the Almighty, his Majesty and Christian society. The majority of people being accused of witchcraft did, in fact, have some sort of relations with Satan, according to preserved court books.

Based on reports from the court hearings, there seems to have been a congruence between popular and learned understandings of witchcraft. Of course, there are some cases of about individual maleficium, but most of the trials are about collective worship of the Devil. Sorcery among the Sami was not directly diabolised during the court hearings, but later given a diabolical interpretation by central county governors like Hans H. Lilienskiold (1650–1703) at the end of the seventeenth century. The Sami thought of their sorcery as a kind of special knowledge, and these cases were conducted as cases against individual magic. Lilienskiold is aware of the different conceptions concerning the Lapland witches and the Norwegian witches, but he explains that magic practised by the Sami are as much devil worship as witchcraft among the Norwegians.¹⁹ The “Lapp skills” of the Sami were less serious, apparently, than the open and direct pact with the Devil as practised by the Norwegian female witches, wrote the county governor. The difference was only skin-deep, however. This Sami craft, too, had a diabolic content and origin, he noted, and maintained that Satan was their master. They conducted evil deeds and ought to be punished for them. In principle, the Sami

¹⁹ Lilienskiold 1998 pp. 60–62.

kind of sorcery is just as black as the Devil and as wild as that of the Norwegians, concludes Lilienskiold.²⁰ As a representative of the Danish-Norwegian Lutheran orthodoxy, Lilienskiold wished to show that the Sami's 'science' of healing, counter-magic, and use of drums originated with the devil incarnate. In this way, the magic of the Sami belonged to a class of well-known categories and interpretations within a hegemonic understanding of culture. What Lilienskiold tries to imply in discussing Sami magic as opposed to magic among Christianised Norwegians is the well known demonological distinction between an implicit and an open or expressed pact with the Devil.²¹

As in other parts of Europe, it was difficult to establish formal proofs of female pacts with Satan, the ability to fly through the air, and Sabbath attendance. This is why witch-hunting in Finnmark became very brutal. To extract confessions to the acts of diabolism, torture and the water ordeal were in use. All the women, and a few men, mostly Sami men, who were thrown into the cold sea, sometimes during the winter season, floated. The water ordeal was used early in a trial proceeding when women tried to deny accusations of all kinds. Direct physical torture, on the other hand, came very late in the proceedings and was not only used for confessions but to get the woman to name other people in her secret sect and those who had attended the witches' Sabbaths, resulting in a chain reaction of further witch-trials. In fact, non-capital sentences were rare between 1610 and 1663.²²

Raising storm and wind by weather magic

Images and accusations of weather magic are the overall feature of the witch persecutions in Finnmark. Both Sami men and Norwegian women were supposed to have dealing with magic in order to manipulate the weather conditions. According to the hand written court books, the witches of the north are considered to be experts in the skills of untying and tying wind knots under the spell of evil magic. To raise the wind by the magic art of ritual spells has a long and winding story throughout European and Nordic history.

The Sami can conjure weather and wind by hocus-pocus, wrote the poet, parish priest and fire-and-brimstone preacher, Petter Dass (1646/1647–1707), in *The Trumpet of Nordland*, an acclaimed Norwegian work. If a countervailing wind prohibits your ship from sailing, according to Petter Dass, you can find a Sami to buy a pliant wind. This the Sami can arrange by way of his secret knowledge. His wind magic will be fixed by three knots on a cloth. To

²⁰ Lilienskiold 1998 pp. 29–30.

²¹ Monter 2006 pp. 711–713 and Dillinger 2009 p. 49.

²² Willumsen 2010 p. 14.

untie one knot means unleashing adequate wind to sail by, but when untying the second knot “the sail must be pulled down to half mast”. And if you untie the third knot, “then she goes too quickly – and with the Pump you must bail.”²³

Petter Dass’ depiction of Sami sorcery resembles the book written by Peder Claussøn Friis (1545–1614), which was published in 1632. Several of Dass’ assertions can be characterised as near renderings of Friis’ views, only this time in rhymes. Friis wrote that the Sami can stir up the wind and that sailors can buy fair winds from them. The wind was handed over on a ribbon of three knots, and they work exactly as described by Petter Dass. With Friis, however, untying the third knot is synonymous with shipwreck and drowning. The opening of a rag's third knot brought on a destructive storm to overwhelm those dealing with the agents of the devil.²⁴

The magic of tying and untying knots is known throughout all of Europe, and it is not geographically isolated to the northern regions or to weather magic. Three knots could be tied during French wedding ceremonies to make the husband impotent. The symbolic fear of castration was so widespread by the mid-sixteenth century that couples got secretly married outside of the local church to avoid affliction. Leading French intellectuals at the time, like Jean Bodin (1530–1596), feared population decline as a consequence of this diabolical art.²⁵ Nonetheless, the magic of knots is best associated with wind forces and communities along the coast. To raise destructive winds, or sometimes to prevent them by knot magic, are skills known ever since ancient times. From coastal areas in Europe, where sea transportation, fishing and trade were of importance, records show how witches could undo knots to conjure

²³ Dass 2015 (1954) p. 72. Here are the relevant verses from "The Trumpet of Nordland":

The people in northernly Norwegian parts
Maintain that in witchcraft and magical arts
The Lapps have a special knowledge

If you are locked up by ungracious wind
And look for a change, so your trip may begin,
The Lapp will arrange such a bargain.

He uses his craft and his magic with speed;
Three knots on the handkerchief are all he needs -
He gives them to you for your keeping.

Untie but the one for a gentle, good breeze,
The sails will be filled, you make progress with ease;
But if you the second will loosen,
You pull in the canvas to barely half mast.
The third will send wind that will race you so fast
That pumps you will have to resort to.

²⁴ Friis 1881 p. 402.

²⁵ Le Roy Ladurie 1981 p. 89.

storms, frighten off the fish and sink fishing boats and larger trading ships. From Homer's *Odyssey*, for instance, we know of the story of Aeolus – the king of the winds – who gave a bag to Ulysses filled with wind. The knot on the bag was to be opened when there was a need for fair sailing winds. The Frenchman Jean Bodin told of the Sardinian captain who bought a rope with three wind knots, and, he added, there were fifty vile ways of using the knots.²⁶

These stories of knotted ropes, and their connection to wind sorcery, were told and retold over and over again. One of the most famous account comes from Olaus Magnus, first published in 1555:

There was a time when the Finns, among other pagan delusions, would offer wind for sale to traders who were detained on their coasts by offshore gales, and when payment had been brought would give them in return three magic knots tied in a strap not likely to break. This is how these knots were to be managed: when they undid the first they would have gentle breezes; when they unloosed the second the winds would be stiffer; but when they untied the third they must endure such raging gales that, their strength exhausted, they would have no eye to look out for rocks from the bow, nor a footing either in the body of the ship to strike the sails or at the stern to guide them.²⁷

As examples of Nordic sorcery, Olaus Magnus mentioned wind magic, spell casting, the ability to foresee the future, signing and the brewing of witches' stews that reportedly brought good fortune. These peoples were in harmony with nature and could interpret the weather. He tells how the inhabitants of the far north can attach wind knots to straps and use magical powers to protect themselves against harm. The inhabitants of Finland and Lapland are experts at this art, writes Olaus Magnus who brands the art of sorcery as mad and deranged. According to him, “the entire world is irresistibly fascinated by this devilish art. Sailors are forced to buy wind because of the wind conditions in the north, and for a slant of money, they get three bewitched knots tied to a strap. Bad things will happen to those who doubt the power of the knots, but they are nonetheless, forced into seeking advice from sorcerers”.²⁸

Since the spread of the books by Olaus Magnus and others there have been a tight connection between wind knots and witchcraft of the northern peoples. Alexander Roberts, a militant protestant and the incumbent of the parish of King's Lynn in Norfolk, wrote a treatise of witchcraft in 1616. He comment on Olaus Magnus and found many of his stories about northern witches and their weather magic "to be meere fictitious, and altogether incredible". But then he continued and writes that these stories are to be trusted because

"by the experience of our owne Navigators, who trade in Finland, Denmarke, Lapland, Ward-house [Vardøhus], Norway, and other countries of that climate, and have obtained of

²⁶ Bodin 1975 p. 82.

²⁷ Olaus Magnus 1996 p. 173.

²⁸ Olaus Magnus 1996 p. 174.

the inhabitants thereof, a certaine winde for twenty dayes together, or the like fixed periode of the time, according to the distance of place and strings tied with three knot,"

and then Roberts repeats the well-known story of what happens when the knots are untied.²⁹ His story was used to convince Robert's readers about the reality of witchcraft, and to justify the execution of a local witch called Mary Smith who was hanged in January 1616.

A bit earlier, in a work printed in 1591, another version of wind magic can be found in the writings of Sir Giles Fletcher, an English ambassador to Russia. Taking up his position in Russia, Fletcher had sailed all the way from London, via northern Norway and to the White Sea where he then went by horse to Moscow. Describing the life of the "wild Sami" of the Kola-Petsamo, he writes:

For practise of witchcraft and sorcerie they passe all nations in the worlde. Though for enchanting of ships that saile along their coast, (as I have heard it reported) and their giuing of winds good to their friends, and contrary too ther, whom they meane to hurt by tying of certaine knots upon a rope (some what like to the tale of Aeolus his windbag) is a very fable, devised (as may seeme) by themselves, to terrifie sailers for comming neare their coast.³⁰

Furthermore, to the *Historia Norwegiae*, one of the earliest written text on Norwegian history, possible from the second half of the twelfth century, the native Sami are described as ungodly sorcerers and as people working "diabolica superstitio in magica arte".³¹

The indigenous people and their involvement in witchcraft persecutions

The first two serious witchcraft cases in Vardø from 1601 were at the time interpreted as a warning of an internal danger that was in the process of building up, in addition to the external threat from the Russians, Swedes and European maritime nations. The King was quick to impose counter-measures. Sami sorcery was to be pursued without mercy, as stated in the special royal letter on different Sami issues in North Norway dating from February 1609. In the seventh and last point of a long letter about the Sami, King Christian IV declared that the Sami witchcraft activity was of such an appalling nature that neither Christian Norwegians nor other noble folk of any kind dare live anywhere near them. This applied particularly to the many fjord branches in Finnmark, where many Sami were residing, wrote the King. The King declared that the Sami use of sorcery was getting in the way of his kingdom's advances and territorial expansion in the North. As a collective group, the Sami posed a threat to the territorial integrity of Denmark-Norway, its state building and its

²⁹ Roberts 1971 p. 20–21.

³⁰ Fletcher citation in Berry and Crummey 1968 p. 204, see also Tanner 1929 p. 248 and Witthoff 1997 p. 146.

³¹ Hansen 2000 pp. 68–70. See also Hansen and Olsen 2014 p. 345, and Barraclough 2016 pp. 50–51.

endeavours to spread civilization and Christianity in the far North. The Sami and their special pattern of mobility were considered by the Nordic state authorities as subjects in need of proper integration into the individual realms. The indigenous way of life caused increasing concern for representatives of the emerging state powers.³²

The Dane *Hans Olsen Koefod* became county governor of Finnmark in June 1597. He travelled vast distances in northern Norway in the winters of 1597/98 and 1598/99 in order to investigate Swedish taxation of the Sami. He presented his extensive findings to the king. It is likely that it was Koefod's report on the Swedish drive towards the northern coast of Norway that convinced Christian IV himself to sail northwards in spring 1599. Koefod was known for his highly satisfactory handling of the crown's northern policies. Not only did he disclose Swedish expansionism, but he also impounded goods on which Russian bailiffs had charged a levy. He was, indeed, the king's right-hand man in the northern borderlands. Unfortunately, the energetic Hans Olsen Koefod suddenly died in Vardø in May 1601, barely 40 years old. The news of his death in the summer dealt a heavy blow to King Christian. There was, however, doubt as to whether Koefod had died of natural causes. There were strong rumours that his death was due to a curse that had been cast upon him. A Norwegian and a Sami, both men, were said to have joined forces in order to bewitch the king's emissary. As a consequence, the stage was set for the forthcoming, largest peacetime persecution in Norwegian history. The fishing community of Vardø became the site of the first two bonfires used in the convictions of the Sami. *Morten Olsen*, from the Sami *siida* community in Varanger, and the Norwegian tradesman, *Christen Schreder* living in Vardø, were condemned to death at the stake for having cast an evil spell on the county governor. It is likely that their mutual conspiracy involved a payment made to the Sami to cast a lethal spell on Koefod. The two men may have conspired with others in their plot against the king's civil servant, but only these two are mentioned in administrative reports, since large sums of money were left in their estates.³³ As we have seen, the first two witch trials in the north were interpreted as omens of escalating domestic dangers, in addition to the external perils posed by Swedes, Russians and foreign merchants.

Fearful of sorcery, the Norwegians, according to reports forwarded to the king in 1608, did not dare to inhabit the fjords of Finnmark where the Sami lived.³⁴ Thus, the King, in the

³² Hansen 2010.

³³ Lr.V 1601–1602 and 1605–1606, packet 1 (Microfilm no. 519), Statsarkivet i Tromsø (The Regional Archives in Tromsø).

³⁴ *Norske Rigsregistrarer* (NRR) IV, 1603–1618 pp. 242–245. The fjords in question are Altafjorden, Laksefjorden, and especially Tanafjorden.

aforementioned letter of 1609, commanded his two northern Norwegian district governors to hunt down and eradicate all kinds of Sami sorcery, and that those who practiced it would be put to death without mercy. The 1609-instruction initiated a merciless persecution of witches among the Sami followed in the 1620s by an even greater hunt of Norwegian women accused of being witches.³⁵

King Christian IV asked for a report on how the two county governors had carried out his royal order. Both commanders took his instructions seriously and submitted reports of their fight against Sami knowledge of sorcery. In May 1609 the first three Sami men were burned, accused of sorcery. There might have been political motives behind the county governor's orders concerning the execution since one of the three, Oluf Amundsen, was known as a Swedish Sami sheriff. From the end of the sixteenth century until the close of the seventeenth century, altogether 37 Sami in the three northern Norwegian counties were formally charged with witchcraft. One Sami man was killed while he was being kept in custody in Vadsø in 1692, while 19 men and 8 women received the death penalty, usually death by burning on the stake. During the process, a few drums, *runebomme*, were destroyed since the church was of the opinion that these drums had a special meaning in the religious and ritual worship of the Sami. Altogether, the Sami make up 20 % of the total number of people who were persecuted for some kinds of witchcraft at the time in the northern part of the country. Early modern witch trials of the high north are distinctive in a European context because of the simultaneous prosecutions of Norwegians, most of them married Norwegian women, and of the native Sami, most of them being men (see Figure 1 above).

Female witches up North

The female witches from Finnmark, as revealed from entries in the court records, clearly make up a diverse social group. The group include young maids, married and unmarried women among the ordinary people in the fishing communities, quite a few young maids, and more prosperous wives from the middle ranks of society. The historical witches in the true north were almost always accused of practising malevolent magic and only rarely of dabbling in white magic. Coastal women used magic to control winds and cause shipwrecks, bad weather, and death, or to frighten fish away from the coast. Several women used their malevolent powers against county authorities and merchants. They also made pacts with the

³⁵ *Norske Rigsregistrarer* (NRR) IV, 1603–1618 pp. 296–301, see page 300, subsection 7, for the king's strong command concerning Sami witchcraft. See also Berg 2016 p. 39.

devil and worshipped him in nocturnal assemblies. The women were accused of having bound themselves to Satan. Once again, the content of forced confessions display rather strong elements of diabolism as a key feature of witchcraft trials in Finnmark. Quite a few of the Norwegian women in Finnmark got death sentences for purely diabolic activities. They had mixed with Satan, been changed into different shapes of animals (metamorphosis), and flew swiftly through the air. There were many confessions, too, of attending assemblies with the Devil. Transformation into an animal was one of the main sign of the demonological witch and of the witches' Sabbaths. One woman in a trial from 1621 told of a Satan who has the power to tie the tongue roots of his disciples.³⁶ She had thus confirmed some central traits as found in manuals on demonology. In another case, a woman confessed that Satan immediately abandoned her after the executioner cut off her eyebrows. This happened as a means of preparation for her water ordeal. Marit Thamisdatter, as she was called, was probably undressed, shaven and bodily searched for the Devil's mark before having been thrown out to sea near the coastal village Makkaur in April 1634. The court wished to make sure that Satan would not influence the outcome.³⁷ Maritt confessed after having undergone the water test. The water test not only worked as an appeal in favour of God's justice but also as a release from the Devil's grasp. Her confession came after what must have seemed to be a painful and shocking confrontation with the Arctic Ocean.

On the other hand, the Devil that these witches in Finnmark allegedly worshipped did not entirely resemble the Devil described at Sabbaths in many other parts of Europe. For one thing, Satan was rarely sexualised, and the witches did not participate in either sexual orgies or cannibalistic activities when they met at the witches' gatherings on the local Domen mountain pass or elsewhere. Their diabolical activities have, so to speak, a more innocent festive character. The absence of sexual connotations in witchcraft confessions was also a feature in the Danish witchcraft trials. As in Norway, there were no reports of sexual promiscuity or cannibalism, but other manifestations of diabolism, such as finding the Devil's marks on the accused, appear in several cases. In Swedish trials, however, during the late 1660s and 1670s, sexual motifs were common.³⁸

A critical close reading of the trials documents from the court books gives the impression that we are dealing with active and relatively resourceful women who were able to speak their minds on the consequences of hard living conditions in an era besieged by economic crises.

³⁶ Lilienskiold 1998 p. 91.

³⁷ Lilienskiold 1998 p. 121.

³⁸ Hagen 2013 p. 390.

Their criticism was aimed at tradesmen from Bergen and the authorities in general. Because of this, we can easily see the witch-trials as an expression of the demonisation of female insurrection and cultural network building. Small fishing villages of eastern Finnmark like Vardø, Kiberg, Ekkerøy and Vadsø were characteristically patriarchal both in form and content. There was a significant shortage of women in the region. Indeed, the female population was modest, compared to a majority of young and single, male fishermen and their employers. At least in some of the worst periods, almost all women of the these coastal villages seem to have been vulnerable to suspicion of witchcraft.

In one way or the other, an uneven division of the sexes can create the basis of conflicts and the kind of human persecution that we see in the region. A demographic imbalance of this order primarily affected women, as the pattern shows. Simultaneously, with events that occurred in the seventeenth century, it appears that the gender difference constituted the building block for independent groups of women. Sorcery persecution can thus be understood as the most brutal way of punishing and limiting unacceptable female behaviour.

Conclusion: Sami men, Norwegian women

It could be said that the witch trials in this part of northern Europe began with the persecution of a few Sami individuals, but then gained full force when it was perceived that a collective internal criminal network of evil Norwegian women was at work. The judicial treatment of ritual magic among the indigenous people helped to lay the groundwork for a much wider witch-hunt. Without the Danish-Norwegian regime's assault on the frontier people, the county governors would have been less likely to have attempted the annihilation of an imagined sect of Norwegian witches with the determination that was shown in the small fishing communities along the coast of Finnmark. In other words, the story of the brutal witch persecution in Arctic Europe is a part of the well-known phenomenon in which conflicting frontier issues in the wake of clash of interests, create new kinds of enemies. The witch hysteria in the far north of Norway has a pattern that resembles Gary K. Waite's findings in his work on Anabaptists and witches. According to him, the "demonizing rhetoric against a threatening group...might again penetrate the mindset of the populace and be readily redirected to other 'outsiders'. In the medieval and early modern eras, many princes used this adaptable popular suspicion to rid themselves of enemies of the state".³⁹

³⁹ Waite 2007 p. 197.

The processes by which the Sami were subordinated to the changing structures of Danish-Norwegian state building had been going on since the late Middle Ages. However, a new and stricter policy of thorough integration of the ethnic minority into Danish-Norwegian society started in the wave of Lutheran orthodoxy in the post-Reformation period, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and lasted for the next two centuries. To make this indigenous people loyal tax-paying subjects of the Danish Crown, the elite had to use strong and sometimes brutal measures. It is vital to underline, that serious conflicts between the Sami and regional representatives of the Danish-Norwegian authorities during this period of state penetration only emerged when their patterns of interests clashed. As Anthony Giddens has reminded us, the general case in conquest states was that indigenous populations would be left to carry on their pre-existing patterns of conduct as long as they paid their taxes and did not try to hinder territorial expansion.⁴⁰ In early modern Finnmark witchcraft, the crime of crimes, represented a diabolic anti-society founded on people, mostly Norwegian women and quite a few Sami men, who stood for disobedience and rebellion. In this context, Lutheran orthodoxy and demonology could be seen as some sort of political theory. Since the witches' demonic power could be nullified by the authority in power, witchcraft prosecutions in Finnmark were conceived as "...a critical test of political legitimacy".⁴¹

Lutheran orthodoxy throughout the seventeenth century provides the framework for the interweaving of worship, absolute power, natural philosophy, and the penal system. The debate on the applicability of the Law of Moses shows that new fields of thought were gradually infiltrating the minds of scholarly theologians and their counselling. The last death sentences in Danish and Norwegian witchcraft trials were imposed during the 1690s, and towards the middle of the eighteenth century, theologians and jurists gradually rejected so-called crimes against religion. Although the development of law making and handling cases moved towards jurisprudence, forcing religion aside in the deliberations of justice, it was not until 1754 that the king stopped consulting the Faculty of Theology in serious cases.⁴²

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⁴⁰ Giddens 1985 pp. 51–52.

⁴¹ Clark 1997 p. 552.

⁴² Krogh 2000 p. 99–101.

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