

WITCHCRAFT AGAINST ROYAL DANISH SHIPS IN 1589 AND THE TRANSNATIONAL TRANSFER OF IDEAS

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with transnational transfer of ideas about witchcraft at the end of the sixteenth century. The outset is alleged witchcraft performed against a royal Danish fleet that was to carry Princess Anne across the North Sea to her husband, King James VI of Scotland, autumn 1589, and following trials in Copenhagen. These include court records from witchcraft trials and diplomatic correspondence between Denmark, England and Scotland. By close-readings of these texts, a multi-layered narrative emerges. The article sheds light on the routes for transmission of witchcraft ideas, as well as the contemporary context for interpreting witchcraft notions.

Keywords: Scotland, Denmark, witchcraft, history of ideas

Introduction

This article deals with alleged witchcraft practiced in the late 1500s and the transnational transfer of ideas about witchcraft. It is based on primary sources from Denmark, Scotland and England, such as court records and diplomatic correspondence, including material which has not been studied previously in witchcraft research.¹ In addition,

¹ Due to several countries and languages involved, the article includes an assortment of quotes in the Older Scottish Tongue and Early Modern English as well as translations from the Danish. All work with primary sources was performed during a research stay at The Institute of Advanced Studies in the Humanities, IASH, University of Edinburgh, 2017, and research stays in Copenhagen in 2016 and 2017, where I have been ‘stipendiat’ at Schæffergaarden, financed by the Funding for Danish-

the link across the North Sea based on original historical documents has not been made before. Thus, novel light will be shed on the witchcraft itself, the communication between individuals who were part of the royal circles in those countries, and transnational transfer of ideas about witchcraft. While the sources are of international origin, the content, however, has a clear thematic core: alleged witchcraft performed against a royal Danish fleet that was to carry Princess Anne across the sea to her husband, King James VI of Scotland, in the autumn of 1589, and the subsequent trials in Copenhagen 1590 and Edinburgh 1590–91, the latter called the North Berwick trials.

I would like to raise two research questions. First: In which way did the transfer of news about the unsuccessful voyage of the Danish fleet in 1589 take place? Second: How can court records from witchcraft trials in Denmark and Scotland give information about the transnational transfer of ideas about witchcraft across the North Sea?

To answer the first research question, this article utilizes state papers as source material. The transfer of ideas about witchcraft are traced through diplomatic correspondence relating the incident. The article presents letters from English, Scottish, and Danish archives, which have not comprehensively been used in this context.² Knowledge about witchcraft against the Danish fleet was communicated back and forth between Denmark, Scotland, and England, and shows the interest for this dramatic event in diplomatic circles.

To answer the second research question, primary sources from courtroom proceedings in Denmark as well as Scotland have been used. As for Scotland, the North Berwick trials of 1590–91 have previously been studied by Scottish historians.³ As for Denmark, this

Norwegian cooperation. I would like to thank Diane Baptie for help with transcription of the Scottish and English sources.

² Jenny Wormald has a few references to state papers in her article “The witches, the devil and the king,” in *Freedom and Authority. Scotland c.1050-c.1650*, ed. Terry Brotherstone and David Ditchburn (East Linton, 2000), 165–180,

³ The most comprehensive work on the Scottish trials of 1590–91, is Lawrence Normand and Gareth Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern*

article references the original Danish court records from the witchcraft trials in Copenhagen 1590 for the first time, due to a peculiar pre-history of the archival process of this source material.⁴ While Henrik Carl Bering Liisberg's book *Vesten for Sø and Østen for Hav. Trolddom i København og Edinburgh*, published in 1909, contains a narrative about the royal fleet's voyage and the trials in both countries, the book does not have any exact references to archival sources. Since documentation is missing, the reliability of this book as historical research may be questioned. The trials in Copenhagen have otherwise been just briefly mentioned by Danish historians.⁵ The reason for the lack of Danish research is probably that the court records from the 1590 Copenhagen trials have been incorrectly archived in the National Archives of Denmark. One might expect that they would be archived under proceedings of the Copenhagen central court, but instead they are archived under Sjællandske Tegnelse, denoting local trials. This is clearly misleading.⁶ The cover of the folder of the court records refers to sorcery and witchcraft performed by the minister and inhabitants of the island Fæø prior to 1590, suggesting that this might be why these

Scotland. James VI's Demonology and the North Berwick Witches (Exeter, 2000).

⁴ Rigsarkivet, Copenhagen [National Archives of Denmark], A232, Danske Kancelli 1572–1660, Sjællandske Tegnelse 1588–1590.

⁵ Leif Ljungberg and Einar Bager, *Malmø tingbøger 1577–83 og 1588–90* (Copenhagen, 1968); Niels M. Pedersen, "Dokumenter til en Trolddomssag under Christian III," *Danske Magazin*, 3 Række, I, 1843, 52–67; Thomas Riis, *Should Auld Acquaintance Be Forgot. . . : Scottish-Danish relations c. 1450–1707*, 2 vols (Odense, 1988), i, 267; Louise Nyholm Kallestrup, "When Hell Became too Small," in *Cultural Histories of Crime in Denmark, 1500–2000*, eds. Tyge Krogh, Louise Nyholm Kallestrup og Claus Bundgård Christensen (New York, 2017), 25; Louise Nyholm Kallestrup: "'Kind in Words and Deeds, but False in Their Hearts': Fear of Evil Conspiracy in Late Sixteenth-Century Denmark," in *Cultures of Witchcraft in Europe from the Middle Ages to the Present*, eds. Jonathan Barry, Owen Davies, and Cornelia Osborne (Cham, 2018), 139–140.

⁶ A232, Danske Kancelli 1572–1660 RAD, Sjællandske Tegnelse 1588–1590, fos. 288v ff. Danske Kancelli is a part of Danish Governmental archives.

records of national significance are stored with local trial records.⁷ I rediscovered these court records by chance in 2016.⁸ The records are the only known sources that document the first instance of the Copenhagen witchcraft trials of 1590. Written in the Gothic hand, these court records are transcribed by me and used in quotations.⁹ To this author's knowledge, it is the first time these records are analysed in an academic setting.

My methodological approach is to go to original sources in the countries concerned and arrive at an interpretation by linking these documents together. Such an approach involves narrative structures: it combines listening to and bringing out the voices of the various actors, establishing an exact timeline of events, and assessing linguistic instruments in the written and oral fields. My interpretation is characterized by cross-disciplinary methods of analysis and close-reading of texts, focusing primarily on narrative discourse—a perspective to the source material as a grand narrative.¹⁰

These documents and analysis will shed new light on the debate over the possible influence of Danish witchcraft trials on the North

⁷ On the cover of the documents: "Fæøes Præst og Indbyggere, som er beskyldt for Signeri og Trolddoms Kunster, derom Landstingsdom." Ref. RAD, A232, Danske Kancelli 1572–1660, Sjællandske Tegnelse 1588–1590; Bering Liisberg, *Vesten for sø*, 5.

⁸ I informed at once my Danish colleague, Louise Nyholm Kallestrup, who could not find these documents.

⁹ The trial documents are not paginated, therefore references use date of trial and name of accused person. Other records elucidate the Danish witchcraft trials in 1590. The case of one of the women accused, namely Margrete, the wife of Jakob the Scribe (Jakob Skrivers), was brought to the Court of Appeal. The proceedings are preserved. Rigsarkivet, Copenhagen [National Archives of Denmark], A232, Danske Kancelli 1572–1660, Sjællandske Tegnelse 1588–1590. Document marked: "Sag imod: Margrethe Jacob Skriivers for Trolddom 2 Stk. Dokumenter 1590 13 Juli. Oktbr.

¹⁰ In terms of methodology, I use the works of Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method* (Paris, 1983), *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (Ithaca, 1988) and *Fiction & Diction* (Ithaca, 1993) as the basis for my close reading of the documents. See also Liv Helene Willumsen, "A narratological approach to witchcraft trial: a Scottish case," *Journal of Early Modern History*, 15 (2011): 531–60.

Berwick trials. While Danish historians thus far have not performed in-depth studies of the relation between the trials on both sides of the North Sea, the idea has been discussed among Scottish scholars, though on a superficial level.¹¹ Christina Lerner was the first to argue that there was a connection between James' trip to Denmark and the introduction of demonological beliefs to Scotland, while P. G. Maxwell-Stuart and Jenny Wormald disagree, pointing to earlier instances of the demonic pact known in Scotland before this trip occurred. Brian P. Levack, Julian Goodare, and Thomas Riis have also weighed in on this debate, which is discussed further in this article.¹² However, none of these authors appear to have utilized the Danish records extensively, particularly the state papers and court records.

In my view, Lerner is right in pointing to a connection between Denmark and Scotland, but she did not have the sources to underpin her thesis. I argue that King James encountered new knowledge from ongoing witchcraft trials in Copenhagen before he left Denmark in the spring of 1590, information that was sensational and permeated royal and diplomatic circles. By using newly discovered primary sources in addition to the sources previously referenced by historians, I argue that King James in fact was exposed to new ideas in Denmark. He learned about collective witchcraft and demonic witches' gatherings, about witches raising storm and personal demons. These ideas were of demonological nature, and they were retold and surfaced during the interrogation at Holyrood at the beginning of the North Berwick trials, where the king acted as

¹¹ Christina Lerner, "James VI and I and Witchcraft," in *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief* (Oxford, 1984), 3–22; P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, "'The fear of the King is death': James VI and the witches of East Lothian," in *Fear in Early Modern Society*, eds. W. G. Naphy and P. Roberts (Manchester, 1997); See e.g. Jenny Wormald, "The Witches, the Devil and the King," in *Freedom and Authority*, eds. T. Brotherstone and D. Ditchburn (East Linton, 2000), 165–180.

¹² Brian P. Levack, "King James VI and Witchcraft," in *Witch-Hunting in Scotland: Law, Politics and Religion* (London, 2008), 41–42; Julian Goodare, "Witchcraft in Scotland," in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian P. Levack (Oxford 2013), 303–305; Riis, *Should Auld Acquaintance Be Forgotten*, i, 266–69.

interrogator. The king himself was a carrier of demonological ideas over the North Sea.

This study thus clearly adds to the existing knowledge by using primary sources as fundamental for interpretation. The article expands upon the basic information already known and gives a detailed, well-researched view of factual trials and the transfer of ideas about witchcraft.

PART I: Storms and Witchcraft in International Correspondence

The Danish Naval Fleet Turns Back

The alleged witchcraft against the King's ships in 1589 is remarkable. Here is the pre-history:

On 20 August 1589, Princess Anne, the second eldest daughter of Frederik II, married King James VI of Scotland *per procura* at Kronborg Castle in Denmark. The Scottish Lord Marischal stood in for King James. On 1 September 1589, Princess Anne left her homeland to travel to Scotland. Her ship, the Gideon, was part of the Danish naval fleet.¹³ Admiral Peder Munk was in command of the fleet, which immediately encountered problems. The first misfortune was that two artillerymen lost their lives when the canons were to fire a salute. One of the passengers on board, Peder Christensen, assistant to the doctor accompanying Princess Anne, kept a diary and wrote about the incident: "Two artillerymen were shot to death at Skansen."¹⁴ On 3 September, gales, headwinds, and leaking ships forced the fleet to put into port in Arendal. Then, after several attempts to cross the North Sea, they had again to turn back on 29 September and put into port in Flekkerø on the southwestern coast of Norway. According to an entry in Peder Christiansen's diary, on 28, 29 and 30 September the ships were halfway between Scotland and Norway.¹⁵ It was then decided that the fleet's ships would part ways. The Gideon would sail to Oslo with Princess Anne, two ships

¹³ Bering Liisberg, *Vesten for sø*, 9.

¹⁴ Bering Liisberg, *Vesten for sø*, 9.

¹⁵ Bering Liisberg, *Vesten for sø*, 30.

would sail to Copenhagen with a letter to the government councils, and one ship would sail to Scotland. However, a Scottish ship arrived at Flekkerø before the ship bound for Scotland had begun its voyage, with King James' messenger, William Stuart, carrying love letters from the Scottish King to his bride.¹⁶ The ships bound for Copenhagen arrived there on 14 October. One ship sailed to Edinburgh, where the Danish messenger, Sten Bille, travelled to King James with news and love letters from his fiancée.¹⁷ Bille also brought with him official letters stating that the Danish ships had been "60 nautical miles" from the Scottish coast when they had to turn back, which is more than halfway.¹⁸ A ship brought Princess Anne to Norway's capital; she should stay there over the winter.

Disappointment in Scotland

The messenger from Princess Anne's ship, Sten Bille, arrived in Leith on 10 October, and went directly to Craigmillar Castle for a meeting with King James VI. William Asheby, the English Ambassador to the Scottish royal court, wrote to Lord Burghley, Queen Elizabeth I's chief minister,¹⁹ the same day: "This morning arrived a gentleman of Denmark, with message from the Princess, and is to have audience in the afternoon at one o'clock [at Craigmillar]. In his company is a Scottish gentleman of the Earl Marishal's train, Andrew Synk[l]er by name, who says that the

¹⁶ Bering Liisberg, *Vesten for sø*, 15; Rune Blix Hagen, "James I, konge i Tåkeland: en rystende fortelling om utsøkt djevleskap rundt et fyrstebryllup i Oslo 1589," *Skepsis* (Oslo, 2008), <https://www.skepsis.no/james-1-konge-i-takeland-en-rystende-fortelling-om-utsøkt-djevleskap-rundt-et-fyrstebryllup-i-oslo-1589/>

¹⁷ For copies of the letters from Anne to King James VI, see J.T. Gibson Craig, *Papers relative to the marriage of king James the sixth of Scotland, with the Princess Anna of Denmark; A.D. MDLXXXIX* (Edinburgh: Bannatyne Club, 1828), xx.

¹⁸ Thomas Fowler to Lord Burghley. 20 October 1589. Bering Liisberg, *Vesten for sø*, 22.

¹⁹ Lord Burghley (1520–1598) was Queen Elizabeth I's closest adviser, and had an enormous influence on many levels. He was in favour of an alliance between Scotland and England. In addition, his approval played a crucial role in the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots.

Princess is in good health, and her company, but sorely beaten with the seas. She put out twice for this coast, but both times *driven back by contrary winds*.” [Author’s italics.]²⁰ Similar wording appears in a letter from Thomas Fowler²¹ to Lord Burghley on 20 October which states that “Steven Beale” (Sten Bille), a Dane, had arrived in Edinburgh with news about the storms that the future Queen had endured: “The Danish ships had been 60 miles from the Scottish coast, but were *driven back* and had to seek refuge in one of the Norwegian inlets.” [Author’s italics.]²² Here we see emphasized powerful elements at play. Just one day after the Danish messenger’s arrival, William Asheby wrote again to Lord Burghley:

Be the report of the gentlemen of Scotland quhilk arrived upon the x day in the morning, it is understand that the Quene and all the flete has bene in greit payne and dangier, having at five severall tymes bene *drevin bak* be storme and *contrarious wyndis*, sundrie of the schippis being lek, and specialie that quhairin the Quene wes. [Author’s italics.]²³

We see from these letters that a significant amount of attention was focused on the storm that prevented Anne from reaching Scotland. The Scottish government correspondence mentions numerous times that the powerful storm occurred on Michaelmas, i.e. 29 September. However, even if there was no explicit mention of witchcraft in the first weeks after the Danish fleet was forced to turn back, there might nonetheless have been a feeling within the royal court that the storms could have been caused by witchcraft and sorcery. Two tragedies at sea, one in Scotland and one related to the Danish fleet in the North Sea, contributed to strengthen this feeling.

²⁰ William Asheby to Burghley. CSPS, vol. 10 (Edinburgh, 1936), no. 236. 10 October 1589.

²¹ Thomas Fowler (1540–1590) was an English lawyer, diplomat, adviser to King James VI and Scottish Ambassador to London.

²² Bering Liisberg, *Vesten for sø*, 22.

²³ Asheby to Lord Burghley. CSPS, vol. 10 (Edinburgh, 1936), no. 238. 11 October 1589.

The Denmark-related accident happened during the royal fleet's voyage to bring Princess Anne to Scotland, during which several sailors died in a series of storm-related misfortunes, culminating in the storm around Michaelmas.²⁴ As King James VI prepared to welcome his bride in Scotland, his mother's friends were working hectically in the royal court. Then an accident happened. Lady Kennedy—Queen Mary's lady-in-waiting, who had already made most of the preparations to receive Princess Anne—drowned in a ferry accident in the Firth of Forth in September 1589: only two people survived the accident. King James' adviser, Sir James Melville of Halhill, wrote in his memoirs that Scottish and Norwegian witches raised a storm in order to take the life of the innocent Princess, but it was her lady-in-waiting who ended up as the victim.²⁵

The ferry accident occurred soon after the Danish fleet had set sail. A ferry on its way from Fife to Leith collided with a sailing vessel on 7 September in the middle of the firth during a powerful storm. The two accidents on either side of the North Sea, both of which affected King James, were being linked in Scottish government circles by early October. On 8 October 1589, just one week after the Danish fleet turned back, William Asheby wrote to Francis Walsingham, principal secretary to Queen Elizabeth I:²⁶

th'upon her embarking a greate pece in the admiral's ship brake in shoting, and killed two or three of the gonners; th'other chance was here in the Firth, a boote passing the 7th of Sept. from Burntisland, in Fiffe, towardes Lythe, *in the midwaie being under saile* and the tempest growing great caried the boote with such force upon a ship which was under seale as the boote sunke presentlie, and almost all the passengers

²⁴ Bering Liisberg, *Vesten for sø*, 9–13.

²⁵ James Melville, *Memoirs of Sir James Melville of Halhill 1535–1617*. Edited, with an Introduction, by A. Francis Steuart (London, 1929), 327–328.

²⁶ Francis Walsingham (1532–1590) was the principal secretary to Queen Elizabeth I from 1573 until his death in 1590.

drowned, emongest whom was Madam Kenedie which was with the late Quene in England. [Author's italics.]²⁷

The same day, William Asheby wrote to Lord Burghley:

The wind has continued south and south-west since the princess's first embarking, which are flat contrary, and have been so strong as no vessel could come to bring news. This long uncertainty brings *fear of some disaster*, that is increased by *two ominous chances*, as they are here interpreted. The [one] upon her embarking a great pe[ce in the] amiralles ship brake in shoting and killed tow o[r thre] of the gonners. Th'other chance hapened h[ere] in the Firth: a boote passing from Bru[nt] Island in Fiffe the 8 of Sept. towards [Lythe], *in the midwaie being under saile*, and the tempest growing verie great caried th[em] with such force upon a ship under saile as the boote presentlie suncke, and almost a[ll the] passengers drowned; *emongest whom was [Madam] Kenedie, who was with the late Quene in Eng[land]*, and divers gentlewomen and marcha[nts] of Edenbrowghe, *to the nomber of fourtie that per[ished], with plate and hangings brought hither f[or] the mariage, which was all lost.* [Author's italics.]²⁸

The letters cited above show that the connection between the two accidents was regarded as fact just one month after the ferry sank and only one week after the Danish fleet was forced to turn back. The news was sent from Edinburgh to London. The accidents in the two countries and the connection between them must have been viewed in both countries as important news that must be shared immediately. The fact that both of these letters from William Asheby were addressed to members of the English Queen's inner circle suggests

²⁷ Asheby to Walsingham. CSPS, vol. 10 (Edinburgh, 1936), no. 233. 8 October 1589.

²⁸ Asheby to Lod Burghley. CSPS, vol. 10 (Edinburgh, 1936), no. 234. 8 October 1589.

that she was concerned about what was happening with King James, and keeping a close eye on his marriage plans.²⁹

On 14 October, two weeks after the fleet had turned back, two of the Danish ships that had been stranded in Norway reached Copenhagen. On the same day, Thomas Tenneker³⁰ wrote from Copenhagen to Walsingham in London: “I have no good newes at the present too wryt of . . . by contrary wyndes the kings shippes w[i]th the lady anna skotse queen are returned clld not recover skotland being allso loath too send {page damaged} ther great shippes on that dangerous coast so late in the year w[hi]ch must nede be a great greeff on boath syds.”³¹ Due to the high risk, the letter notes, the squadron with Princess Anne would not sail to Scotland that autumn, which would cause sorrow in the Scottish people.

Two months after the Danish fleet had to turn back, the bad omens were again commented on. On 28 November, William Asheby wrote to Michael Throckmorton: “Doubts not but the storm will be overblown, and hopes to see *those make shipwreck that have by their enchantments raised the tempest.*” [Author’s italics.]³² It is also possible to read Asheby’s expression as a metaphor, since weather magic was a common concept in England and the Nordic countries since medieval times.³³ Such an interpretation might connect to his conflict with other persons. However, this letter is

²⁹ Colonel Stuart was an intermediary between the Danish and Scottish royal houses regarding the issue of marriage. Melville, *Memoirs*, 322, 326.

³⁰ Thomas Tenneker was the English Ambassador to Denmark in 1589. *List and Analysis of State Papers, Foreign Series Elizabeth I: August 1589–June 1590*, ed. Richard Bruce Wernham (London, Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1964), 458.

³¹ National Archives London, State Papers Denmark, State Papers 75, II, D7.

³² Asheby to Throckmorton. CSPS, vol. 10 (Edinburgh, 1936), no. 299. 28 November 1589. Michael Throckmorton was the son of George Throckmorton and his second wife, Mary Brydges. “Throckmorton Family,” *Welcome to My Tudor Court* (accessed 24/05/2018), www.tudorplace.com.ar/THROCKMORTON1.htm.

³³ Francis Young, *Magic as a Political Crime in Medieval and Early Modern England: A History of Sorcery and Treason* (London, 2017), 39, 107; Stephen A. Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 2011), 65–66.

dated at the end of November 1590, when two women, Geillis Duncan and Agnes Sampson, already were imprisoned in Edinburgh for alleged witchcraft, and interrogation had started. Sensational witchcraft trials were sailing up, and the word witchcraft must have been everywhere in Scottish and English court circles. Thus, I think it is likely that in Asheby's mind, the words 'shipwreck,' 'enchantments,' and 'tempest' had connotations to storm raised by witches.

The letters mentioned above reveal a feeling of discomfort related to several misfortunes that had struck the royal circles around the same time. In general, this might point to providence, a view shared by Protestants: God might be giving human beings a forewarning or showing His displeasure with some actions. God might seek to punish or cause repentance and remorse. For example, James Melville suggested that the destroyed harvest and raging pestilence in the year 1585 occurred when "the Lord send sic tempest of wather and rean, that all began to cry."³⁴ Each person should therefore take the responsibility of becoming a better Christian. This thinking is centred round individuals. However, I argue that this thinking centred not around providence, but witchcraft. I argue that factual witchcraft trials as well as diplomatic correspondence between Denmark-Scotland-England during the entire year of 1590 point to the influence of specific learned ideas about witchcraft across the North Sea, ideas that became imperative to the persecution of alleged witches in Scotland. The fear expressed in the letters mentioned above is not directed to individual persons' conscience. Instead there is an impending fear connected to concrete incidents, that there might be someone causing these incidents. The answer could be witches. Looking for witches meant finding scapegoats to blame for frightening and unexpected accidents. Thus the focus on each individual's conscience is missing.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the explanation of accidents at sea, that witches collectively raised storms, gained foothold. Their power to perform evil was derived from the devil when they entered into allegiance with him. When reasons for an accident could not be found, witchcraft as an explanation was easy

³⁴ Robert Pitcairn, ed., *The autobiography and diary of Mr. James Melvill, with a continuation of the diary* (Edinburgh, 1842), 222.

at hand. These ideas came strongly to the fore within court, church, and state in Scotland from the 1590s onwards, and had a strong impact on what became one of the most intense witch-hunts in Europe.³⁵ During this persecution, the accused persons confessed due to torture, not repentance. The emphasis on witchcraft in the minds of learned as well as lay people at the time in question is the reason why I have chosen to heed the witchcraft context in the analyses performed in this article.

“I am a trew prince”

In the early autumn months of 1589, King James VI stayed primarily at Craigmillar Castle. He felt that he had experienced a great misfortune, and he turned to God and announced a public fast and prayers. But this could not solve everything. The people waited for their new Queen. King James VI was rumoured to like young, male companions, and now it was important for him to show in the long run that he could produce an heir to the throne. He had to show decisiveness in the critical situation, and was taking events into his own hands.³⁶ Therefore, he decided to travel to Norway and leave his home country for an unknown period of time:

These reasons, and innumerable others howerlie objected, moved me to hasten the treatie of my mariage: for as to my owne nature, God is my witnesse I could have abstained longer nor the weill of my patrie could have permitted This treatie then beinge perfited, and the Quene my bedfellow cuming on hir journey, how the contrarious windes stayed hir and where she was driven it is more then notorious to all men The word then comminge to me that *she was stayed from cuming through the notorious tempestes of windes . . . I, upon the instant, yea verie moment, resolved to make possible on my part that which was impossible on hers . . .* The place where I resolved this in was Cragmillar,

³⁵ Julian Goodare, *The European Witch-Hunt* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 28.

³⁶ Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 32.

not one of the whole Counsell being present their. And as I take this resolution onelie of my self, *as I am a trew prince, so advised with my self onelie what way to follow fourth the same.* [Author's italics.]³⁷

The final remark that he is a “trew prince” and that he took this decision on his own, without advisers present, suggests that it was all-important for him to give a public demonstration of independent action and decisiveness. This same understanding prevails in church circles, as formulated in the parish council in Perth, stating that the King “took a sudden secret Resolution of goeing thither himself.”³⁸

William Asheby attempted to downplay this in a letter of 21 October: “This resolucion, if you go foreward with it, will greatlie amase your good and faithfull subjectes, and make the wourld judge your grace rather a passionate lover then a circumspect prince.”³⁹ King James, however, provided a detailed description of how the country should be governed in his absence and placed his relative Lord Bothwell in a position of authority. The document, which contained 16 points, bore the heading “order set down by the Kingis Majestie, to be observed upon his return to Scotland.”⁴⁰ However, the King had great confidence that an emotional letter could have a positive impact on public opinion in Scotland.

On 24 October 1589, King James left the Scottish port of Leith “in the night” and was driven back the next day by a sudden storm at Pittenweem, where he stayed until the morning of 25 October.⁴¹ He “arryvitt att Fleckra [Flekkerø] the 29 of the same” writes William Hunter to William Asheby on 3 November. Hunter makes the point

³⁷ *The Register of the Privy Council of Scotland*, vol. IV (His Majesty Register House, Edinburgh, 1902), 427–429.

³⁸ National Library of Scotland, Special Collection, Adv. Ms. 31.1.1. Some Extracts from the 1st volume extant of the Register of the Kirk Session of Perth. 28 October 1589, p. 60.

³⁹ Asheby to King James. CSPS, vol. 10 (Edinburgh, 1936), no. 251. 21 October 1589.

⁴⁰ Craig, *Papers relative to the marriage of king James the sixth of Scotland*, 27–34.

⁴¹ Asheby to Lord Burgley. CSPS, vol. 10 (Edinburgh, 1936), no. 262. 30 October 1589.

that “The Kingis majestie was never sick.”⁴² After Flekkerø meetings, James travelled to Norway’s capital, and on 21 November, he ratified the marriage contract. Two days later, on 23 November, a formal wedding ceremony took place in the Bishop’s Palace in Oslo, led by a Scottish clergyman and with Scottish representatives present.⁴³

On 22 December, the couple travelled to Elsinore, where they remained at court for about four months, during which King James had conversations with two well-known Danes. One was Niels Hemmingsen, a professor first of Greek and then of theology, who had been dismissed from the University of Copenhagen. Born in 1513, Hemmingsen was an old man in 1590 and lived in Roskilde.⁴⁴ The other was the astronomer Tycho Brahe. The conversations with these men illustrate some of James’ areas of interest. He was interested in learned demonology, and Hemmingsen had published a demonological work in 1575, which was familiar to the Scottish King. However, what is known from the conversations between Niels Hemmingsen and King James is that they talked about the doctrine of predestination.⁴⁵ Related to the North Berwick trials, Niels Hemmingsen, like Martin Luther, disagreed with ideas about gatherings of witches, shapeshifting and flights through the air.⁴⁶ A major element of the North Berwick trials focused precisely on witches’ conventions.⁴⁷

A fleet dispatched by the Danish King left Copenhagen for the second time on 21 April 1590, nine months after the first attempt. Once again Admiral Peder Munk was in command. After arrival in Leith on 1 May 1590, Anne was crowned Queen of Scotland on 17

⁴² The British Library, London, Egerton Manuscript 2,598, fol. 190.

⁴³ Davis Stevenson, *Scotland’s Last Royal Wedding* (Edinburgh, 1997), 34–39.

⁴⁴ Niels Hemmingsen was dismissed from his professorship in theology at the University of Copenhagen because his view of the Eucharist deviated from the Lutheran understanding. Hemmingsen is known in part for the publication of his book *Admonitio de superstitionibus magicis vitandis* (Copenhagen 1575), which was widely read.

⁴⁵ Stevenson, *Scotland’s Last*, 49.

⁴⁶ J. Haustein, *Martin Luthers Stellung zum Zauberwesen und Hexenwesen* (Stuttgart, 1990), 56–67.

⁴⁷ Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*.

May 1590 during a magnificent coronation ceremony which was also attended by Peder Munk. Two days later the Queen's arrival in Edinburgh took place, also a grand affair.⁴⁸

PART II: Witchcraft Trials in Denmark and Scotland

Witchcraft Trials in Copenhagen

Before King James and his bride left Denmark, some highly unusual court cases came up in Copenhagen.⁴⁹ During the spring of 1590, several women in Copenhagen had been accused of witchcraft and brought to trial at the city court. Admiral Peder Munk played an active role in bringing these cases to court.⁵⁰

There was a legal precedence for trying witches of weather magic before 1590; the notion of witches raising storm at sea was already known in Denmark as the result of two catastrophes. The first was in 1543, when several alleged witches outside of Elsinore were thought to have bewitched a fleet of 24 ships that were to be used in the ongoing war against the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (1500–58). The second was in 1566, when it was believed that witches in Copenhagen raised a storm that sank the best ships in the fleet off the coast of Gotland.⁵¹

The first woman to be charged in Copenhagen in the spring of 1590 was Ane Koldings, known as 'the Devil's mother.'⁵² Her case came before the court in April 1590, and it must have garnered tremendous attention within royal circles. Interrogated under torture, she confessed that Jakob the Scribe [Jakob Skrivers] had asked her

⁴⁸ Craig, *Papers relative*, 47–55.

⁴⁹ Riis, *Should Auld*, 267.

⁵⁰ A232, Danske Kancelli 1572–1660 RAD, Sjællandske Tegnelse 1588–1590.

⁵¹ Bering Liisberg, *Vesten for sø*, 21.

⁵² She may be the same as Anne Judequinde, called 'Dywels moder' who was accused during witchcraft trials in Malmø in 1579, and mentioned again in Malmø trials 1590. Ref. Leif Ljungberg and Einar Bager, eds., *Malmø tingbøger 1577–83 og 1588–90* (København, 1968), 80; 336.

and her accomplices to bewitch the royal fleet.⁵³ Demonological ideas were referenced during the trial—among others, the use of Apostles, personal demons given to a witch by the Evil One when entering the devil’s pact. This idea is also found in other countries.⁵⁴ Ane Koldings confessed that she had performed witchcraft so that “the Lady would not reach Scotland *on the first attempt*.” [Author’s italics].⁵⁵ This formulation, which is repeatedly used in the Danish trials, refers to the Danish naval fleet’s voyage in the autumn of 1589. Participation in collective witchcraft is clearly a demonological idea. Ane Koldings implicated nine Copenhagen women, thus ensuring the continuation of the trials.⁵⁶ She was sentenced to death on 20 May and burnt at the stake in Copenhagen on 15 or 17 June.⁵⁷

King James thus knew before he left Denmark about witchcraft against his person. News quickly reached London. A message about the execution of Ane Koldings was sent just one week after the execution: “The xvijth [17th] of this moneth thair was an wytch burnt at Copemanhaven convinced to have bewitched the Queenes voyage towards Scotland this last year, and at her death she confessed divers others and some chif women to have ben partakers of this Sorcery, the w[hi]ch be apprehended, and like to be punished.”⁵⁸ It was ‘hot stuff’; part of a dangerous conspiracy that went to the heart of government authority. The year was 1590, no more than three years

⁵³ A232, Danske Kancelli 1572–1660 RAD, Sjællandske Tegnelser 1588–1590.

⁵⁴ Personal demons are found in Finnmark County, Norway’s northernmost region, which suffered harsh witchcraft trials in the 1600s. Demonological ideas are documented in minutes of court proceedings from 1620 onward. In England, animals called familiars had the same function as a personal demon.

⁵⁵ A232, Danske Kancelli 1572–1660 RAD, Sjællandske Tegnelser 1588–1590.

⁵⁶ Of these, six were imprisoned and three were released on bail. Bering Liisberg, *Vesten for sø*, 53.

⁵⁷ In a letter sent from Denmark to the English royal court, the date set was 17 June, while Peder Christensen writes in his diary that she was executed on 15 June. Bering Liisberg, *Vesten for sø*, 29–30.

⁵⁸ The National Archives of Britain, London. State Papers Denmark 1590, June 25, Dr. Parkins to Burghley, dated Rødby.

since Elizabeth I had approved the execution of King James' mother, Mary, Queen of Scots. Politically it was unclear what would happen with the English throne when Elizabeth I died without an heir. As a result of these circumstances, the witchcraft was regarded as a highly political attack.

In Copenhagen, after the execution of Ane Koldings in June 1590, the trials of the other accused women continued. The interrogations took place from 13–16 July 1590.⁵⁹ Peder Munk was back to Denmark and took active part. The first was Karen Vævers. She confessed that Kirsten Søndags, Margrete Skrivers, and a farmer's wife⁶⁰ had come to Margrete and asked her to send her Apostle, Langinus,⁶¹ with their Apostles to the King's ships, in order to destroy them. Vævers also confessed that she had spoken with the farmer's wife and admonished her three times, for the sake of Christ's death and suffering, that she should not harm the King's ships because her [Karen's] husband, son, and son-in-law were on board. In addition, Karen confessed that Kirsten Søndags took her Apostle from her and put him in an empty beer barrel, which was sent to the fleet at sea. The farmer's wife later approached Karen and responded on Karen's query that the Apostle was with the fleet. Then Karen said that if she had known that they would use him for that purpose, she would never have lent him out. The farmer's wife had also told her that the Lady would not reach Scotland on the first attempt. She confessed that she had sent her Apostle, Langinus, to the farmer's wife twice, and admonished the demon to pester the wife with pestilence and sickness so that she would have a quick death and thus prevent her from harming the King's ships or causing someone's death, since her relatives were on board the ships.

⁵⁹ A232, Danske Kancelli 1572–1660 RAD, Sjællandske Tegnelser 1588–1590.

⁶⁰ Orig. 'en bondekone,' could be the same as Bente Bondequinde, accused during the Malmø trials on 6 July 1590, was sentenced to execution on 27 July, and as accused and interrogated in July 1590, and mentioned as burnt on 17 August. Ref. Ljungberg and Bager, *Malmø Tingbøger*, 335, 350.

⁶¹ The name 'Langinus' is sometimes written as 'Longinus' in the primary sources.

Two days later, on 15 July, Maren Mads Bryggers [Maren, the wife of Mads the Brewer] was interrogated. She confessed to having engaged with the other women “in counsel and deed” at Karen Vævers’ house. Asked what art they intended to perform with the aid of some clay vessels, she responded that she believed they were to bewitch the ships to make sure they would never reach Scotland. Maren swore on her soul and salvation that Ane Koldings told her it was all about performing witchcraft against the ships.

At this point there may well have been a break in the proceedings, during which it is likely that the torture rack was put to use. This is not recorded in the sources, as it was illegal to apply torture prior to conviction in Denmark-Norway.⁶² However, when the examination continued, Maren was very willing to confess and to denounce more women: she confessed that Anne Jespers, Kirsten Søndags, Ane Koldings, Karen Vævers, and herself had gathered in Karen Vævers’ house. There were clay vessels on the table, and they did not want the ships to reach Scotland on the first attempt. She swore to this, on her soul and salvation.

The following day, 16 July, Maren Mogens [Maren, the wife of Mogens] was questioned. She was reputed to be practicing witchcraft and accused ten years earlier, in 1578, but was found not guilty.⁶³ She started by implicating Margrete, confessing that Margrete Jakob Skriver [Margrete, the wife of Jacob the Scribe] took part in performing witchcraft against the King’s ships, and that Margrete was as well versed in witchcraft as the others and indeed herself. She then confessed that Margrete, Anne Jespers, Ane Koldings, Kirsten Søndags, the farmer’s wife, Karen Vævers, and herself had been gathered in Karen Vævers’ house in order to bewitch the King’s ships, and she swore on her life, soul, and salvation that this was true. Moreover, Maren Mogens confessed that it was Jakob Skrivers who had asked her to perform witchcraft against the King’s ship; he was behind the operation and had set it all in motion.

⁶² Kolderup-Rosenvinge, *Samling av gamle danske love*, Bd. 4 (København, 1924), 219, 224; Liv Helene Willumsen, *Witches of the North: Scotland and Finnmark* (Leiden, 2013a), 233; Liv Helene Willumsen, *Dømt til ild og bål* (Stamsund, 2013b), 251.

⁶³ Bering Liisberg, *Vesten for sø*, 32.

Again, the torture rack may well have been used during an interval. The next question to Maren Mogens concerned the timing of the gathering. She responded that it was the previous year, around Michaelmas, “om Sonstj mickelβdags thidt,”⁶⁴ which is 29 September. The date is highly significant, as will be seen.

Maren Mogens confessed and swore on her wish to be a child of God that Ane Koldings had approached her and asked if she would let her demon *Pilhestskou*⁶⁵ accompany Ane Koldings’ Apostle Smuck⁶⁶ to the King’s ships to see what state they were in. This was carried out on the bequest of Jakob Skriver, because Jakob had promised her that she would be paid handsomely for the service, which she was, as were the others. She further confessed that Kirsten Søndags had borrowed Karen Vævers’ demon *Langinus* and put him in an empty beer barrel, after which she had commanded him to proceed to the ships. This took place, and the Apostles arrived at the fleet at the same time.

The women interrogated so far had been imprisoned. On 22 July, the Danish King wrote a letter to ensure that efforts were made to retain the three women who had been bailed, to make sure the proceedings continued. Meanwhile, Peder Munk was forced to preoccupy himself with other matters on his return to Denmark. Before he sailed for Scotland, he had accused Treasurer⁶⁷ Christoffer Walkendorf of being responsible for the leaky naval ships in the autumn of 1589. The proceedings against Walkendorf were heard on 27 July. Peder Munk lost the case on 4 August.⁶⁸

News about the continuing Danish witchcraft trials reached Edinburgh on 23 July, just over a week after the proceedings had started in Copenhagen: “It is advertised from Denmark, that the admirall there hathe caused five or six witches to be taken in Coupnahaven, upon suspicion that by their witche craft they had staid the Queen of Scottes voiage into Scotland, and sought to have

⁶⁴ RAD, A232, Danske Kancelli 1572–1660, Sjællandske Tegnelse 1588–1590.

⁶⁵ Literally Arrow Horse Shoe.

⁶⁶ Literally Beautiful.

⁶⁷ The Treasurer (*rentemester*) was head of the Treasury.

⁶⁸ Although Walkendorf won his case against Peder Munk, he was demoted.

staid likewise the King's returne."⁶⁹ It is clear from the wording that the Admiral is a well-known person in Edinburgh; there was no need to mention his name. It should also be noted that the 'first embarking' for Scotland in 1589, when Princess Anne was due to cross, has now been extended to also include the King's return journey, in the spring of 1590.

The Copenhagen women, except Margrete, were sentenced to death in July and executed same autumn. On 4 September two alleged witches were burnt on the stake, probably Maren Mogens and Karen Vævers.⁷⁰ Margrete and her husband, Jakob the Scribe, were next in line. The confessions given in July had described the witchcraft as having been ordered by Jakob the Scribe.

Margrete was denounced by both Karen Vævers and Maren Mogens, and had endured a reputation for witchcraft for 20 years. She confessed to taking part in the Michaelmas gathering in 1589. Her Apostles were Longinus and Pilhesteskou: the former name carrying biblical connotations, the latter meaning 'arrow horse shoe.' She confessed that they had been using clay vessels and beer barrels, and that "they wished that the ships would not reach Scotland on their first attempt."⁷¹ The Apostles were referred to as demons. Margrete's husband, Jakob the Scribe, had previously been mayor and head of the town council, mentioned in English and Scots as 'bailiff' or 'bailie.' Previously, he had been involved in a dispute with Peder Munk, who had hit him. News dispatched to England therefore suggest an explanation that involves Jakob the Scribe seeking revenge on Munk, so much so that he ordered the witches to take action.

The case against Margrete must have started in August 1590. On 3 September 1590, a learned gentleman in Copenhagen, Dr. Paul Knibbe, wrote to Daniel Rogers in London. Dr. Knibbe was a

⁶⁹ Robert Bowes to Lord Burghley. CSPS, vol. 10 (Edinburgh, 1936), no. 454. 23 July 1590. Robert Bowes was an English diplomat, stationed as Ambassador to Scotland 1577–1583. He was appointed Ambassador after Asheby. Bowes was also Ambassador to Scotland while the North Berwick trials were going on in 1590–1591.

⁷⁰ Peder Christensen's diary, ref. Bering Liisberg, *Vesten for sø*, 65–66.

⁷¹ RAD, A232, Danske Kancelli 1572–1660, Sjællandske Tegnelser 1588–1590.

Dutchman, and one of the travelling companions of Princess Anne autumn 1589.⁷² The letter was received on 13 October 1590:

Our admiral [Peter Monck] has been made an inquisitor of the depravity of witches. Last year, when we were about to sail to Scotland, several wicked women conspired to drown⁷³ him, like some of them had freely confessed—having since been burnt. But as the entire ship was to be destroyed, and the Queen of Scotland was likewise on board, they were not able to agree amongst themselves for a long time. Yet through the urging on of the wife of Jakob Skriver, consul of Copenhagen, they finally attempted it, and witnessed the powerful hand of God, which kept the most excellent sovereign and all of us in the same ship safe from the snares and follies of the Devil. When the consul [Jakob Skriver], having been returned here [to Kolding] after fleeing, furthermore sought to break his thread of life by a noose in prison—brought about by the most apparent marks of his bad conscience—the nobles sent [him] to Copenhagen, along with his wife, to be examined there more thoroughly and submitted to due punishment. Travelling with them was the admiral—out of hatred for whom the very clear confessions [state] these sorceries to have been prepared—so that he might urge on the delaying magistrates.⁷⁴

Jakob the Scribe escaped from prison but was later arrested and brought back to Copenhagen on 22 August. Moreover, in his despair, he tried to take his own life in prison, which was put down to his

⁷² Liv Helene Willumsen, “Trolddom mot kongens skibe 1589 og transnasjonal overføring av idéer,” *Historisk Tidsskrift* (Denmark 2019): 309–44.

⁷³ Orig. Lat. ‘Obruendo.’

⁷⁴ National Archives of Britain, London. State Papers, vol. 75, II, Danish Domestic Affairs, HH4. Paul Knibbe [Knibbius] to Dr. Daniel Rogers, letter dated Kolding 3 September. Orig in Latin.

guilty conscience. Given that Jakob the Scribe's wife, Margrete, is also mentioned in the letter, and given that both spouses were to be examined and appropriately punished, this takes us a step further from the first stages of the witchcraft trials. We are now closer to the main characters who set the witchcraft operation in motion.

On 29 September, the house of Jakob the Scribe was searched for evidence in the case against Margrete. Many witnesses were called. On 19 October, Margrete was sentenced to death in fire at the stake. Death sentences in witchcraft trials in Denmark had to be referred to the Landsting as the supreme court of appeal.⁷⁵ Margrete's nephew tried to have the sentence commuted, but in vain.⁷⁶ Margrete was burnt on 17 February 1591. Her husband, Jakob the Scribe, had all his belongings sold on 8 June 1591.⁷⁷ He lived out his days in a poor house.

Witchcraft Trials in Scotland

The reported witchcraft against the naval fleet of the Danish King and the witchcraft trials that followed in Copenhagen pre-empted the North Berwick trials in Scotland 1590–1591.⁷⁸ The North Berwick witch-hunt has been extensively studied, and both text-critical editions of the court records and analyses of the trials have appeared.⁷⁹ During the North Berwick proceedings, the accused confessed that witches in Denmark and Scotland had colluded in performing sorcery to harm the Scottish King and his bride. These trials have become famous because King James himself took part in the interrogation of the defendants and because their confessions included fantastical stories of a witchcraft convention in the North Berwick Church on the night of Hallowe'en 1590, with the devil himself on the pulpit and other elaborate details. Demonological ideas were heard for the first time during the Scottish witch-hunt.

⁷⁵ V. A. Secher, *Forordninger, Recesser og andre Kongelige Breve 1558–1660*, Bd. 2 (København, 1887), 33.

⁷⁶ Bering Liisberg, *Vesten for sø*, 68–79.

⁷⁷ Bering Liisberg, *Vesten for sø*, 89.

⁷⁸ Riis, *Should Auld*, 267–69.

⁷⁹ See the bibliography in Julian Goodare, ed., *Scottish Witches and Witch-Hunters* (Basingstoke, 2013), 234–45.

The first preliminary hearings took place in late November. Two local women from East Lothian were questioned: Geillis Duncan and Agnes Sampson. This is the first documentation we have of interrogation in the North Berwick trials. Sampson lived in Keith in East Lothian and was previously imprisoned before the Presbytery in Haddington; however, she was brought to Edinburgh before the North Berwick trials started.⁸⁰ Likewise Duncan, who was questioned by David Seaton, her master, lived in East Lothian. Geillis Duncan was working as a maid at Seaton's house, and Agnes Sampson was a widow with a regional reputation as a 'wise wife.' Geillis confessed that "in the midst of the firth they met with the [] of Coppenhown, where after they had gotten her name they commoned together."⁸¹ This is one of the first sentences recorded in the trial documents. It is obvious that the collusion between Scottish and Danish witches is given priority.

Agnes Sampson was questioned on the same day. She had given a letter to another woman: "She confesses the bill [letter] was to raise the storm for staying the queen's coming home."⁸² This means that the idea of a storm stopping the Queen's arrival in Scotland was active from the very start of interrogations. A link has been construed between sorcery, storm, and an attack on the royals.

During the continued questioning of Agnes Sampson, the topic of the storm recurs, as does the Michaelmas date: "She confesses that the devil told her about the Michaelmas storm and that it would do mickle scathe [much harm] both at sea and at land . . . She confesses that the devil said it should be hard for the king to come home and that the queen should never come except the king fetched her."⁸³ The

⁸⁰ Agnes Sampson had been in the searchlight for witchcraft and accused before the presbytery of Haddington before the secular trial in Edinburgh started at the end of 1590. Berit Veierud Busch, *'They shipped all in at North Berwick in a boat like a chimney': Forestillinger om samlinger knyttet til de hekseanklagede i North Berwick-prosessene* (Master thesis, University of Tromsø, 2018) 70; David M. Robertson, *Goodnight my servants all: The Sourcebook of East Lothian Witchcraft* (Glasgow, 2008), 65.

⁸¹ Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft*, 136.

⁸² Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft*, 151.

⁸³ Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft*, 135, 239.

obstacles that had been put in the way of the royals were confessed to be the same as in Denmark. However, an additional creature has now entered the arena: the devil. It was the devil that told Agnes about the storm; it was the devil that predicted that the Queen would not come home unless the King fetched her. Introducing the devil may have been the result of a leading question. Agnes was tortured during the trial, and the same was the case with Geillis Duncan.⁸⁴

The examination of Agnes Sampson continued on 4 and 5 December. On the latter of these dates, she confessed “that the devil foretold her of the Michaelmas storm and that great scathe would be done both by sea and land. . . . She confesses there was a bill written by John Fian and delivered to Gillie Duncan to bear to Leith to Janet Fairlie She confesses that the devil said to her the king should hardly come home, but that the queen should never come except he fetched her with him.”⁸⁵ There is yet again a confession from Agnes that features a storm intended to stop the royal crossing. The devil is referred to in association with herself as well as the storm. As opposed to the Danish trials, the Scottish trials see the devil appear as an independent character, more powerful than the personal Apostles to which the Danish women confessed.

The topic of the storm was repeatedly raised during the earliest stages of the North Berwick trials, and was referred to in Agnes Sampson’s dittay, dated 27 January 1591, in items 13 and 14: “Item fylit that sche wes maid foirknawin of the devill of the last michelmas storne and that thair wald be grit skayth baith be see and land Item fylit that sche wes maid foirknawin be the spreit that the quenis maiestie wald nevir cum in this country except the king fetcht hir.”⁸⁶ In the dittay, items expressed during pre-trial examinations, are compiled, and with only minor linguistic variations.

On 7 December, after James VI had questioned Agnes Sampson about Michaelmas and the storm, the North Berwick trials received

⁸⁴ Torture of Geillis Duncan and Agnes Sampson is stated in the pamphlet ‘Newes from Scotland.’ King James I *Dæmonologie in Forme of a Dialogue* 1597. *Newes from Scotland* 1591 (London, 1924), 9, 12.

⁸⁵ Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft*, 213–46.

⁸⁶ National Records of Scotland, JC 2/2, fol. 202a.

their first mention in state papers in Edinburgh. The King's contribution was highlighted. Robert Bowes wrote to Burghley:

The King "by his owne especiall travell" has drawn Sampson, the great witch, to confess her wicked doings, and to discover sundry things touching his own life, and how the witches sought to have his shirt or other linen for the execution of their charms. In this Lord Claud and other noblemen are evil spoken of. The witches known number over thirty, and many others accused. Their actes are filthy, lewde, and phantasticall.⁸⁷

The reference to 'his shirt' stems from the confession of a woman who admitted that she tried to get hold of a piece of the King's shirt so that she could use it for sorcerous purposes. The King's 'especiall travel' may be associated with the King as interrogator, but it may also suggest torture. The same day Roger Aston wrote to James Hudson: "We are now busy examining witches, who confess many strange things."⁸⁸ There is no doubt that the recently commenced witchcraft trials attracted great attention.

PART III: Narratological Analysis and the Transfer of Ideas

One of the main arguments of this article is that there is a link between the Copenhagen witchcraft trials of 1590 and the North Berwick trials of 1590–91. I would like in the following to reintroduce some of the quotes mentioned above and connect them more clearly to the transfer of ideas, to get the language and the analysis in close proximity to one another. In doing so, prominent demonological witchcraft ideas come to the fore: collective witchcraft, witchcraft gatherings, witches' ability to raise storms, witches' relation to their gods, and the use of objects when performing witchcraft. The voices of the various actors determine the linguistic instruments.

⁸⁷ Bowes to Lord Burghley. CSPS, vol. 10 (Edinburgh, 1936), no. 505. 7 December 1590.

⁸⁸ Roger Aston to James Hudson. CSPS, vol. 10 (Edinburgh, 1936), no. 507. 7 December 1590.

There are several layers to the links. In both countries, collective witchcraft is presented through the women's confessions. This is a clear demonological feature: several persons gather to perform witchcraft. The women's confessions create a coherent story, a collective narrative. The confessions complement one another. In the Danish trials, the confessions of the individual defendants confirm or elaborate on a narrative that someone else has commenced. Similarly, we see from the Scottish North Berwick trials that as a growing number of suspects were brought before the court to plead their guilt, their various contributions make up a grand narrative. Gradually, the witchcraft against the King's ships and the collusion between witches in two countries become increasingly detailed; in the end, a causal chain becomes manifest.

There is a link made between the ferry accident in Scotland and the bad omen in the North Sea. On 8 October 1589, Asheby wrote to the principal secretary of Queen Elizabeth I, mentioning the two bad omens: The ferry was "*in the midwaie being under saile* and the tempest growing great" when the accident happened. [Author's italics.]⁸⁹ The same day, William Asheby wrote to Lord Burghley, underlining the uncertain situation and the danger ahead, plus indicating a link between the two disasters: "This long uncertainty brings *fear of some disaster*, that is increased by *two ominous chances*, as they are here interpreted . . . killed tow o[r] thre] of the gonners . . . a boote passing from Bru[nt] Island in Fiffe the 8 of Sept. towards [Lythe], *in the midwaie being under saile* . . . and almost a[ll the] passengers drowned; *emongest whom was [Madam] Kenedie, who was with the late Quene in Eng[land].*" [Author's italics.]⁹⁰

In Asheby's letters, the accidents signal something evil on its way, and now, not only had the Danish fleet had to turn midways in the North Sea, the ferry accident also happened 'midwaie' between Fife and Leith. This choice of words show similarity regarding the position of the ships, and links the two bad omens. The speed of this information from Scotland to England becomes clear when we see

⁸⁹ Asheby to Walsingham. CSPS, vol. 10 (Edinburgh, 1936), no. 233. 8 October 1589.

⁹⁰ Asheby to Lord Burghley. CSPS, vol. 10 (Edinburgh, 1936), no. 234. 8 October 1589.

that it took still another week for a letter to be sent from Copenhagen by Thomas Tenneker to Walsingham in London, telling that “contrary wyndes” had forced the queen to return.⁹¹

A couple of weeks later, before leaving for Norway, King James addressed his farewell letter to the Privy Council of Scotland, emphasizing that the queen “*was stayed from cuming through the notorious tempestes of windes.*” [Author’s italics.]⁹² King James’ own reflections penned in this letter suggest his forebodings were clearly influenced by the anxiety that spread around the royal court in Edinburgh. He worries about the Queen’s exposed position, and an undertone created by the word ‘notorious’ might suggest that there is an ominous aspect to the weather. It should be noted that ‘notorious’ could also be used in a neutral sense at the time, meaning “common or well known.”⁹³ However, considering the context of documents in question, where the strength of the storm has been a recurrent issue, it is reasonable to believe that King James has used ‘notorious’ in the word’s strongest meaning.

Later historical works also make a connection between witches making storms and the return of the Danish fleet in 1589. Patrick Anderson’s continuation of Hector Boece’s *Chronicles of Scotland*⁹⁴ highlights the way that the ideas of witchcraft were transmitted: the storms were raised by magicians and witches because they were different from storms coming from natural causes.

{*written in margin* – Tempests raised by magicians}

Many there were that thought *these tempests were raised by the Sorceries of Magicians and Witches* for the winds were more blustering, the seas more rough and loftie, the gusts more schort and frequent then those which proceed of naturall causes; and that the devills

⁹¹ National Archives London, State Papers Denmark, State Papers 75, II, D7.

⁹² *The Register of the Privy Council of Scotland*, vol. IV (His Majesty Register House, Edinburgh, 1902), 427–29.

⁹³ *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, sub notorious.

⁹⁴ Hector Boece (1465–1536) published a chronicle of Scotland in 1527. It was written in Latin and covered the period to the death of James I. The book was published in Scots by John Bellenden in 1536.

the princes of the ayre do raige more licenciously
amongest the Northen Nations which are Barbarously
simpell. [Author's italics.]⁹⁵

In addition, the memoirs of Sir James Melville of Halhill demonstrate how the ideas surrounding the sorcery against the Danish naval fleet were interpreted in Scotland. He tried to summarize his views on what had happened and why it happened. His account provides clear causal connections, and he construes a consistent explanation. Revenge is considered to be the motive, associated with a quarrel between Peder Munk and Jakob the Scribe. I will return to Melville's memoirs towards the end of this article.

The complexity of ideas and images displayed above throws light on this article's first research question. Through diplomatic correspondence across the North Sea, ideas about witches raising the North Sea storm in 1589, and ominous accidents occurring simultaneously in Denmark and Scotland, are effectively disseminated in contemporary state papers. The speed of spreading this news is amazing. The transfer of these ideas would certainly influence the North Berwick trials, which started late autumn in 1590.

The second research question dealt with the information in court records. A very good example of the link between the Danish witchcraft trials of summer 1590 and the Scottish North Berwick trials can be found during the very first interrogation in Edinburgh, undated, but prior to 4 December 1590. It is remarkable that the very first sentence, the initiation to the whole trials, deals with witches in Copenhagen. During this interrogation, where King James took part, Geillis Duncan was questioned together with Agnes Sampson. And the first sentence of the records is: "Gillie [Geillis] confesses that *in the midst of the firth they met with the [] of Coppenhown*, where after they had gotten her name they commoned together[r]." [Author's italics.]⁹⁶ The Scottish witches had cooperated with the Danish witches, and they met in the middle of the firth, which might be interpreted as in the middle of the North Sea. Wording used in

⁹⁵ National Library of Scotland, Special Collections, Adv. Ms. 35.5.3.

⁹⁶ Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 136.

correspondence in royal circles of Edinburgh from the previous year were activated once again under interrogation. It is also clear that King James was probably the one person, or one of very few in Scotland, who knew that Danish witches were connected to the storm against the Danish Kings' ships. There might have been others who knew of the Copenhagen witchcraft trials, most likely Robert Bowes and Melville of Halhill; however, only one of these acted as interrogator and thereby had the opportunity to pose leading questions, and that was the king himself. King James was also best positioned to introduce such an issue initially in a courtroom. It could be no coincidence that this famous incident had clear connections with the threat he had experienced one year previously. He feared the witches, and believed they were capable of causing accidents.

The ideas about witchcraft transferred from Denmark to Scotland in 1590 were generally demonological in focus: relation with the devil, witches' meetings, performance of collective witchcraft, plus the use of witchcraft objects to raise storms. As for Scotland, these ideas were central for the further development of intense Scottish witchcraft panics throughout the seventeenth century.

Relation with the devil is a core element in the demonological doctrine. The first accused woman in Copenhagen, Ane Kolding, was known under the name 'The Devil's Mother,' clearly pointing to her relation with The Evil One. The same name comes to the fore during the previous Danish witchcraft trials in 1543 and 1566. Also of interest for the 1590 Copenhagen cases, are two witchcraft panics taking place in Malmø.⁹⁷ In the first one, 1578–1579, one accused was also called The Devil's Mother.⁹⁸ The confessions show that formulas were used: witchcraft was thrown in 'thousand devils' name,' and soil was thrown when performing witchcraft.⁹⁹ Also a wax figure of a child was used to perform witchcraft. All seven trials resulted in death sentences.¹⁰⁰ In the second Malmø panic—which

⁹⁷ Leif Ljungberg and Einar Bager: *Malmø tingbøger 1577–83 og 1588–90*, København, 1968.

⁹⁸ This was Anne Judequinde, called 'Dyuels moder'.

⁹⁹ Ljungberg and Bager, *Malmø tingbøger*, 30.

¹⁰⁰ Ljungberg and Bager, *Malmø tingbøger*, 80.

took place from July until November 1590,¹⁰¹ overlapping with the 1590 Copenhagen trials—ideas like the devil’s pact, the devil’s mark, a personal devil, witches’ gatherings, and the water ordeal came to the fore. There were seven death sentences during these trials. Some links exist between the trials in Malmø and the Copenhagen trials of 1590 with regard to the use of the expression ‘The Devil’s mother,’ raising storm against ships, and name-given helpers, ‘Apostles,’ when performing witchcraft.¹⁰²

We have thus seen that the image of witches raising storm and the devil was established in Denmark and adjacent Swedish areas well before 1590.¹⁰³ In the confessions given by the accused women in Copenhagen 1590, the relation to the devil is explained in the way that the women have been awarded a personal devil, an ‘Apostle,’ that helps them to perform evil deeds, an element known in Nordic countries and paralleled in England.¹⁰⁴ The named demon is given to a woman when she enters the devil’s pact.¹⁰⁵ The diabolic nature of the ‘Apostle’ is clear; we are talking about the devil’s prolonged hand, given as a favour to witches in alliance with the Evil One. The Danish witchcraft trials centred around the devilish power, and King James was acquainted with these thoughts in spring 1590. In the North Berwick trials, the devil himself appears, in various shapes, even like a “rick of hay.”¹⁰⁶ He is the one in command in the North Berwick church gathering, on the night of Hallowe’en 1590, and he

¹⁰¹ Ljungberg and Bager, *Malmø tingbøger*, 335–81.

¹⁰² Ljungberg and Bager, *Malmø tingbøger*, 336.

¹⁰³ Gotland was Swedish until 1361, then invaded by the Danes, and again Swedish in 1645, the conclusion of peace in Brömsebro.

¹⁰⁴ See Liv Helene Willumsen, *Witches of the North*, 254, 326 for the ‘Apostles’ in the Finnmark sources. In England, the ‘familiar’ owned by alleged witches, is supposed to be a personal demon, see Charlotte-Rose Millar, “Dangers of the Night: The Witch, the Devil, and the ‘Nightmare’ in Early Modern England,” *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2018): 154–81, on pp. 154–155.

¹⁰⁵ Willumsen, *Witches of the North*, 255; Liv Helene Willumsen, “Board Games, Dancing, and Lost Shoes: Ideas about Witches’ Gatherings in the Finnmark Witchcraft Trials,” in *Demonology and Witch-Hunting in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Julian Goodare, Rita Voltmer and Liv Helene Willumsen (London, 2020), 270, 271.

¹⁰⁶ Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 149.

is the witches' ally. The transfer of this core demonological idea—that devilish power in the form of witches' gathering is vital in performance of witchcraft—is crucial for the North Berwick trials.

The idea of witches' meetings is central during the witchcraft trials in question in Denmark as well in Scotland. The fact that accused persons in both countries confess to having taken part in gatherings, is important. In Denmark, both Maren Mads the Brewer's and Maren Mogens confessed to meetings in the house of Karen Vævers. This collective aspect is magnified in the confessions of the North Berwick trials, with detailed descriptions of the conventions in North Berwick and in Acheson's Haven, both with the devil present.¹⁰⁷ When the idea of witches' meetings is such a powerful one in witchcraft persecution, it is because it encourages and requires further denunciations, particularly of those who had allegedly participated in such a gathering. The witches' meetings in Copenhagen came to be influential during the North Berwick trials: witches' conventions were dangerous and efficient.

In Copenhagen, the women in the house of Karen Vævers managed together to raise storms to prevent Princess Anne from coming 'the first time to Scotland,' when they sent out one of the demons 'in the middle' of the North Sea. This idea is re-found in the North Berwick trials not only as a performance to destroy a ship, 'The Grace of God,' but also traced in the location 'in the midst' at the opening of the North Berwick trials, with links to Copenhagen. The location itself, 'in the midst,' is an image that plays a role—told and retold. The same goes for Michaelmas. As collective witchcraft differs fundamentally from individual witchcraft due to the diabolic nature of the first mentioned, the transfer of the collective aspect of witchcraft is a feature of profound influence across the North Sea. Mighty powers are at work when witches' storms are launched, and the fear for disasters and tragedies is lurking round every corner and puts its stamp on the mentality.

The use of objects to perform witchcraft vary from case to case in early modern witchcraft confessions. In Denmark, clay vessels in water were used to cause shipwrecks, while in other Nordic countries, knots on a rope and egg shells were used.¹⁰⁸ In Scotland,

¹⁰⁷ Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 158–59.

¹⁰⁸ Liv Helene Willumsen, *Trollkvinne i nord*, 32, 36.

a similar idea is found. In a witchcraft case from 1618, involving Isobell Inch and John Stewart, the idea of sinking a ship is documented. Both clay vessels and a creature with a face like an ape is involved.¹⁰⁹ The idea of using objects to perform witchcraft on an individual basis, was known in Scotland before 1590.¹¹⁰ We see this idea activated when Agnes Sampson confessed that several of the accused, on the devil's order, had made and used wax figures and a kind of liquid produced from a dead toad to harm his Royal Highness. Also, the use of cats to raise storms is confessed to by Agnes Sampson.¹¹¹ Cats are mentioned in many countries in connection with performance of witchcraft.¹¹² The use of objects to create storm appears in confessions in the Danish witchcraft trials as well. This signals that even the forces of nature's elements bow before witchcraft. We see the same in the North Berwick confessions: witchcraft is a very strong power. This truth is believed by the court officials in Copenhagen, in the letters of diplomatic correspondence, and by the judiciary of the North Berwick trials. Nowhere in the court records mentioned above, nor in the state papers, do we find any doubt about this power of the witches to manipulate even nature's own elements. Weather magic is believed possible, particularly with the help of the devil and witchcraft objects.

The question whether King James brought the devil's pact with him from Denmark to Scotland, is referred to above. However, I think it is more appropriate and more fruitful to pose the question: What *kind* of demonological ideas did King James bring with him from Denmark to Scotland? From the analyses of Danish court

¹⁰⁹ *Trial, confession & execution of Isobell Inch, John Stewart, Margaret Barclay, and Isobell Crawford, for witchcraft, at Irvine, anno 1618* (Ardrossan, 1855).

¹¹⁰ In Scotland, the use of small bags with 'witcheries' to place in certain places, but also other objects, were common. See Liv Helene Willumsen, *Dømt til ild og bål*, 16, 26–27.

¹¹¹ Normand and Robert, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 240.

¹¹² Christian IV met a cat which was connected to witchcraft on his voyage to Finnmark and Kola peninsula in 1599. Rune Blix Hagen, "Den sorte kats forbandelse - Christian 4.s møde med samisk trolddomskunst," *Siden Saxo*, vol. 22, no. 2 (2005): 4–15.

records above, it is obvious that in the spring of 1590 King James was acquainted with the ideas of witches' meetings, witches' ability to raise storm, witchcraft performance 'in the middle' of the North Sea, and the diabolical nature of witchcraft. He had heard the name 'The Devil's Mother' used to refer to Ane Koldings. King James took part in the interrogation at Holyrood pre-December and onwards 1590, and he was the only one in the courtroom who could question about the witches of Copenhagen and combine the image 'in the middle' of the North Sea for the witches of Copenhagen with the image of the Scottish ferry 'in the midst' of the firth, so that it ended with co-operation between Scottish and Danish witches, now 'in the midst of the firth.' Even if the word 'betwixt' is once used in the interrogation of Agnes Sampson,¹¹³ the wording 'in the midst of the firth' is used in the early interrogation of Geillis Duncan.¹¹⁴ As a whole, the emphasis on 'in the midst' makes it a marked rhetoric expression due to frequency.

Furthermore, the fear of witches and 'ominous chances' in the countries involved, expressed in diplomatic correspondence, was also a fear shared by King James, who must have read the state papers. Thus, King James brought back from Denmark to Scotland ideas and fear that certainly put a stamp on the North Berwick trials

Linguistic Devices

In looking at linguistic devices prominent in this transfer of ideas, interesting linguistic features appear. As we are in an oral tradition when looking at the confessions of the alleged witches, one of the devices available for transferring ideas about witchcraft is imagery. The women who stood accused in witchcraft trials were living in oral societies, and pregnant images facilitate the transfer of ideas. This type of oral transmission can be traced in the minutes of the court proceedings, which provide a transcript of the defendants' verbal statements. The distinct expressions 'in the midwaie' and 'in the midst' have repeatedly occurred in the documents referenced above. It was used when the Danish fleet was forced to turn back. It was used to describe the Scottish ferry accident. It was used to describe

¹¹³ Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 144.

¹¹⁴ Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 136.

the convention of Scottish and Danish witches who were purported to be in collusion. By focusing on ‘in the midwaie/midst,’ attention is drawn to a meeting place where witches from two different countries retain authority over their own territory, yet are in a position to communicate with one another. According to the Scottish witches, the Danish fleet never reached Scottish territory. This type of midpoint conjures up a strong image, which is easy to remember.

This evidence highlights the transfer of ideas by written as well as oral means. All diplomatic correspondence, and the ideas revealed in these letters, are rumours that circulated in the royal courts—rumours of dangerous things afoot that might harm James VI and his bride. The letters firstly show that they believed in witchcraft. They believed it was possible for witches to cause accidents and tragedies. Secondly, the correspondence shows the immediacy of the delivery of the news of witchcraft; top government officials in other countries were informed as soon as the news broke. Thirdly, the state papers disclose an interesting linguistic characteristic: words and phrases are repeated, while minor changes are frequently introduced from one letter to the next. This means that slight modifications were introduced to the witchcraft narrative along the way. These may relate to whoever was involved, the timeline of events, or other narrative devices. Fourthly, the state papers show that it was important to pass the news on, not only to one foreign country, but to many.

Written sources about the transfer of witchcraft ideas are linked to the learned elite: people who could write and compose, who were knowledgeable and educated, and who were familiar with Europe’s scholarly concept of demonological witchcraft. They believed it was possible for witches and sorcerers to manipulate powers, and they held the opinion that the devil might appear in this scenario. This made witchcraft dangerous. The written exchanges that are presented above reveal notions found in a segment of society that held significant influence. The correspondence involved people at the very summit of state power, and helped to convey a fear of what witches could achieve against the nations’ monarchs.

Amongst the oral sources, the confessions in particular demonstrate transmission. The majority of those accused were commoners and had no formal education. Stories passed on by word of mouth were the vehicles they used to convey thoughts and notions.

This affected the form and content of their confessions. *Maleficium* was coupled with ideas of a demonological nature. Elements of malevolent sorcery, such as the use of objects or spells, can be seen merged with a demonic aspect. The Danish defendants confessed to having personal Apostles. In the Scottish confessions, the devil incarnate appears. In both countries it is likely that demonizing was introduced by leading question, and as a consequence of torture. The result was serious indeed.

The oral character of witchcraft trials highlights the scribe's attempt to be accurate when transcribing the spoken word. Oral markers include coordinate clauses, superfluous words, the establishment of a timeline, proximity to the real world, causal relationships, and features taken from folklore and the vernacular.¹¹⁵ Similar attributes are found in the confessions. A down-to-earth perception of witchcraft is demonstrated in Denmark during the congregation in Maren Vævers' house. The alleged witches in Scotland were down-to-earth in that they rarely involved unrealistic particulars. They provided detailed descriptions of the places they met, how the witchcraft operations were planned, and how certain physical artefacts, whether letters or objects, were employed.

Repetition is a frequently used device in oral delivery. It may work as a volume-based mnemonic: it is easier to remember things that are repeated many times over. It is also interesting to note that in the minutes of the Danish court proceedings, there is a level of accuracy included in the frequently repeated phrases. For example, a recurring statement is that witchcraft was performed as the Miss sat out for Scotland on her 'first attempt' in 1589.¹¹⁶ When this level of accuracy is provided by word of mouth, it is included as a safeguard.

Another specifically linguistic aspect that originates from oral tradition is the Michaelmas festival: in the vernacular traditions of both Denmark and Scotland, a day when evil spirits are afoot. Michaelmas is mentioned in both countries in connection with performed witchcraft, thereby providing another link between the countries. Weather magic is also an element found in both countries.

¹¹⁵ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word* (London, 1988), 36–75.

¹¹⁶ Orig. 'Frøken'. From Karen Vævers' confession. RAD, A232, Danske Kancelli 1572–1660, Sjællandske Tegnelse 1588–1590.

Using clay vessels—in many other countries egg shells were favoured—to cause shipwrecks is a common procedure in descriptions of malevolent sorcery. It is worth noting that the sources show how notions of folk belief get assimilated with demonological ideas in confessions in witchcraft trials. This is common all over Europe, and exemplified in this article. Popular belief is a knowledge that people in a local community possess. The fusing together of popular belief and learned demonological ideas is a precondition for the demonizing of ideas existing within folk belief and *maleficium* that often is seen unfolding in the courtroom during witchcraft trials, as well as in the mentality sphere of early modern villages.¹¹⁷

If we leave behind the legal documents and their documentation of orality and instead ask what else might have provided an opportunity to transfer ideas, an obvious answer would be voyages and the personal meetings that these voyages facilitated. There were a great many of them. Sten Bille travelled to Scotland to advise the King that the naval fleet had turned back. Another messenger travelled to Denmark with the same missive. Princess Anne travelled with her entourage to Oslo. King James travelled from Edinburgh to Flekkerø and onwards to Oslo. Scotsmen travelled to Oslo to attend the wedding ceremony. The royal couple travelled to Elsinore. Admiral Peder Munk met with many people from James' inner circles and attended the solemnities in connection with Anne's coronation. Staff at the royal courts not only wrote letters, they also travelled to visit each other in person. All these would have carried with them notions as mental baggage. They will have encountered people they had an opportunity to influence. They will have been able to talk to influential people in the countries they visited. These travellers, who had first-hand knowledge of the witchcraft performed against the King's ships, contributed through their oral disseminations to the transnational transfer of ideas. It is likely that they also contributed to the transmission of fear of witchcraft. But the most important carrier of ideas, and the mightiest, was King James himself.

¹¹⁷ Gustav Henningsen and Bengt Ankarloo uses the term acculturation about this process of change that took place in the villages. Ankarloo and Henningsen, "Introduction," in *Early Modern Witchcraft: Centres and Peripheries*, eds. Ankarloo and Henningsen (Oxford, 1993), 14–15.

Debate on Transfer of Demonological Ideas

So far, I have presented my own research, my answers to the two research questions posed initially, based on primary sources: state papers and court records. However, the question of potential influence on the North Berwick trials from Denmark has occupied several scholars working with research on witchcraft and cultural transfer, and viewpoints have come to the fore during several decades. Christina Larner, Jenny Wormald, P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, Brian P. Levack, Julian Goodare and Thomas Riis have all taken part in this debate. I would therefore like to present the main points of this historiographical line in order to show how my own research has interacted with previous scholarship, and added to this pool of research by providing explanations on the transfer of demonological ideas from Denmark to Scotland prior to the North Berwick trials.

In 1973, Christina Larner argued that new ideas appeared around 1590 in the prosecution of Scottish witches, particularly “the demonic pact and the witches’ meetings to worship the devil; and those became central point in many later Scottish prosecutions.”¹¹⁸ She says that King James’ rapid move from being indifferent to becoming an ardent prosecutor in the North Berwick trials “cannot be stated categorically.”¹¹⁹ However, Larner finds two explanations to be convincing: One explanation is that King James was “introduced to demonology and titillated by it in Denmark, and returned to Scotland suggestible and ready to see witchcraft where he had seen none before.”¹²⁰ Larner argues that King James got to know the demonological ideas in meetings with two learned Danish persons, the astronomer Tycho Brahe and the theologian Niels Hemmingsen. Larner’s interest in King James’ changing attitude to witchcraft is interesting and shows that she weighted demonological ideas and King James learning of the same. Larner had already, in

¹¹⁸ Christina Larner, “James VI and witchcraft,” in *The Reign of James VI and I*, ed. A. G. R. Smith (London, 1973), 74–90. The article is reprinted in Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion*, 3–22; Christina Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion* (Oxford, 1985), 10. Orig. publ. 1984.

¹¹⁹ Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion*, 13.

¹²⁰ Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion*, 13.

her PhD in 1962, an idea that King James' stay in Denmark spring 1590 influenced what later happened in Scotland.¹²¹ This point is still true today when it comes to the North Berwick trials, as the new ideas about witchcraft coming to the fore during these trials represent a watershed in the content of Scottish witchcraft trials. Larner's thought that King James learned demonological ideas from Brahe and Hemmingsen, however, has not been supported later. According to what is known from the king's meeting with the two famous Danes, it is not clear that the topic of demonology was brought up during their conversations.¹²²

Larner's other explanation is that "when rumours of treasonable sorcery started, he [King James] was receptive rather than sceptical."¹²³ It was the idea of an assault on his kingly person that convinced him about the reality of 'the sorcery threat.' Eight years later, in 1981, Larner maintains in *Enemies of God* that the witch-hunt of 1590–1591 "was stirred up to express Scoto-Danish Protestant solidarity."¹²⁴ The witchcraft trials in Edinburgh and Copenhagen, she argues, were generated to account for the naval misfortunes in bringing Anne of Denmark to Leith: "For James they were an opportunity to identify his enemies and stir up support."¹²⁵ This argument has to do with King James' political situation, but does not say anything about the new content of witchcraft trials that we see during the North Berwick trials, and it does not throw light on the king's crucial interrogation of alleged witches at the end of 1590, where he posed questions of demonological nature and assumed a cooperation between Danish and Scottish witches. This explanation cannot account for where the king learned demonological ideas and cannot answer my research questions, wherein the history of mentalities plays a significant role. It is to be noted that Larner knew that there were witchcraft trials going on in Copenhagen, but she had no access to these court records, and she

¹²¹ Christina Larner (née Ross), "Scottish Demonology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries and its Theological Background" (University of Edinburgh PhD thesis, 1962), 110.

¹²² Willumsen, *Witches of the North*, 236, n 74.

¹²³ Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion*, 13.

¹²⁴ Christian Larner, *Enemies of God* (Oxford, 1983), 83. Orig. publ. 1981.

¹²⁵ Larner, *Enemies of God*, 83.

did not know the Danish language. Therefore, she did not have the sources to underpin her thesis, which is where my research comes in. Larner also believed that in the closing stages of the North Berwick panic, a general commission for trying witches was established, and that the commission continued until 1597.¹²⁶

P. G. Maxwell-Stuart contests Larner's theory.¹²⁷ He states that King James did not take any interest in witchcraft before 1590, so the question is posed whether the king's trip to Scandinavia 1589–90 could have changed this. However, he correctly concludes that the king's conversations with Tycho Brahe and Niels Hemmingsen do not give any support for transfer of demonology. Further, Maxwell-Stuart argues that "Danish trials almost invariably concerned themselves with specific offences committed by sorcery, and they scarcely bothered with the notion either of the *Sabbat* or of the Satanic pact."¹²⁸ This does not correspond with my research, as witches' meetings were known in Danish witchcraft trials prior to 1590, and the devil's pact is seen implicitly in the occurrence of Apostles, a personal demon given to a woman when she entered a pact with the devil. When it comes to Scotland, Maxwell-Stuart argues that the Satanic pact was known in Scotland as early as 1532, mentioned in a catechism.¹²⁹ However, to what degree this had impact on secular witchcraft trials before 1590 is unclear. He also maintains that papers relating to the East Lothian witches do not suggest that they were "attending anything like a Continental *Sabbat* or that they travelled thither by flying through the air."¹³⁰ However, the entire North Berwick trials were dealing with witches' conventions: among others, the North Berwick convention and the witches' meeting in Acheson's Haven. In addition, there is the element of spirit flight which might be connected to the North Berwick trials. King James discusses in his witchcraft treatise, *Daemonologie* (1597), both body flight and spirit flight, the latter

¹²⁶ Goodare, "Witchcraft in Scotland," 304; Larner, *Enemies of God*, 35.

¹²⁷ Maxwell-Stuart, "James VI and the witches," 209–25.

¹²⁸ Maxwell-Stuart, "James VI and the witches," 212.

¹²⁹ Maxwell-Stuart, "James VI and the witches," 212.

¹³⁰ Maxwell-Stuart, "James VI and the witches," 212.

denoting the spirit taken out of the body and carried away. This is echoing the North Berwick trial of John Fian.¹³¹

Jenny Wormald's findings support Maxwell-Stuart's conclusion, although arriving at her conclusions separately. Wormald doubts that the king's meetings with Tycho Brahe and Niels Hemmingsen included diabolical witchcraft,¹³² and claims that there were demonological witchcraft trials in Scotland prior to 1590, documented by Larner's own *Source-Book of Scottish Witchcraft*.¹³³ This argument is also supported by the pamphlet *Newes from Scotland*, which states that a Scotsman, the bailie depute in Tranent, David Seaton, knew about the demonic pact before 1590. Wormald finds no rational explanation of why the king changed his mind about the danger of the North Berwick witches, and maintains that here "one might speculate about the possible role of that shadowy group, the Danish witches, or Agnes' acquaintance among those who served the king."¹³⁴ Thus, Wormald here brings up a possible connection to Danish witches, which is a continuation of Larner's thinking; however, she does not have material to support this path. At this point, my research adds considerably to the picture of a cooperation among witches across the North Sea.

Neither Maxwell-Stuart nor Wormald manages to explain why there was a turning point for King James with regard to witchcraft in 1590. They argue that the Denmark stay was not the reason for the devil's pact to appear in the North Berwick trials. Like Larner, they see the devil's pact as the key to understanding the king's change of mind and his involvement in the North Berwick trials. However, focusing on the devil's pact may be misleading, as long as other demonological ideas might have had a strong impact: the most important element brought from Denmark to Scotland by the king was exactly the idea of witches' gatherings, in addition to the demonic element included by the personal demons.

¹³¹ Julian Goodare, "Witches Flight in Scottish Demonology," in *Demonology and Witch-Hunting in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Julian Goodare, Rita Voltmer and Liv Helene Willumsen (London, 2020), 151; Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*, 329.

¹³² Wormald, "The Witches, the Devil and the King," 166.

¹³³ Wormald, "The Witches, the Devil and the King," 170.

¹³⁴ Wormald, "The Witches, the Devil and the King," 175.

Thomas Riis is another participant in the debate. He argues against a Danish-Scottish connection influencing to the North Berwick trials. He refuses Larner's speculation that a discussion on demonology took place "between King James and Tycho Brahe and the Danish divines during their conversations," as the king's contacts with Danish intellectuals do not support this assertion.¹³⁵ One of Riis' arguments is that the devil's pact and "the witches' worship of him" were features that did not appear at all in the parallel Danish trials.¹³⁶ As for the Copenhagen trials 1590, Riis refers to Bering Liisberg, not to primary sources. For Danish trials in general, his reference is a study from Jutland 1614–38, which does not take into account trials prior to 1590.¹³⁷ Still, it should be noted that this study in fact documents both the devil's pact, shapeshifting, and witches' gatherings.¹³⁸

Julian Goodare has taken part in the debate on several points. Regarding knowledge of demonological ideas in Scotland before 1590, he has argued that the Protestant Minister John Knox, leader of Scotland's Reformation 1560, was aware of the demonic pact.¹³⁹ As for legal procedure, he has shown that the general commission for trying witches from 1591 until 1597, assumed first by Larner, and later by Norman, Roberts, and Wormald, was illusory: no such commission had existed. Procedures for trying witches remained constant throughout the Scottish witch-hunt, with trials kept either in the justiciary court in Edinburgh or in the locality by the authority of a commission of justiciary.¹⁴⁰ Further, Goodare mentions that Wormald rightly gave James a more nuanced role than traditional accounts when it came to the responsibility for the prosecutions of the 1590–91 and 1597 panics. However, Wormald argued that King

¹³⁵ Riis, *Should Auld Acquaintance Be Forgot*, i, 121–30; 268.

¹³⁶ Riis, *Should Auld Acquaintance Be Forgot*, i, 268–69.

¹³⁷ Merete Birkelund, *Troldkvinden og hendes anklagere: danske hekseprocesser i det 16. og 17. århundrede* (Århus, 1983), 118.

¹³⁸ Birkelund, *Troldkvinden og hendes anklagere*, 80–85.

¹³⁹ Julian Goodare, "John Knox on Demonology and Witchcraft," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, 96 (2005): 221–245

¹⁴⁰ Julian Goodare, "The framework of Scottish Witch-Hunting in the 1590s," *Scottish Historical Review* 81 (2002): 240–50; Goodare, "Witchcraft in Scotland," 304–5.

James became a ‘sceptic’ before or during the 1597 panic, and that James’ doubts were evident in his treatise *Daemonologie* (1597). Goodare has argued against this, saying that the order of August 1597, which revoked recent witchcraft trial commissions, was not only a ‘sceptical’ measure but could also be supported by witch-hunting enthusiasts. There was evidence in September 1597 of the king’s keenness to prosecute witches, something the genuine ‘sceptics’ criticized him for. In addition, Goodare maintains that it was not credible to suggest that *Daemonologie* was a ‘sceptical’ work.¹⁴¹ This view has been supported by Brian P. Levack, who states that it fits his broader interpretation of James. The most important aspect of James’ involvement in 1590–91 and in 1597 was that it politicized Scottish witchcraft.¹⁴² This is a sound argument, which clearly relates to the Danish-Scottish witchcraft connection.

Another issue which has been debated between Lerner, Goodare and Levack, is the degree of central control in witchcraft trials. While Lerner argued for a strong concern of central government, Levack stressed that the original impetus for prosecution came mainly from the localities rather than from the centre, and that most Scottish trials were held by local lairds using commissions of justiciary, who were not accountable centrally for their decisions.¹⁴³ To this, Goodare in his answer held forth that commissions to try witches were granted centrally by the Privy Council, which demanded a detailed written case against the suspect.¹⁴⁴ Finally, Levack and Goodare agreed that authorizing local elites to hold trials represented a lower degree of

¹⁴¹ Julian Goodare, “The Scottish Witchcraft Panic of 1597,” in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. Julian Goodare (Manchester, 2002), 60–6; Goodare, “Witchcraft in Scotland,” 305.

¹⁴² Levack, “King James VI,” 41–2; Goodare, “Witchcraft in Scotland,” 305.

¹⁴³ Brian P. Levack, “State-building and Witch Hunting in Early Modern Europe,” in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe: Studies in Culture and Belief*, eds. Jonathan Barry, Marianne hester, and Gareth Roberts (Cambridge, 1996), 96–115.

¹⁴⁴ Julian Goodare, “Witch-Hunting and the Scottish State,” in Goodare, *The Scottish Witch-Hunt*, 122–45.

central control than holding trials in courts directly organized from the centre.¹⁴⁵

To the discussion above, my answer is that the king brought with him demonological ideas from Denmark, not least the idea of witches' gatherings. He also was exposed to other demonological ideas from the ongoing witchcraft trials. I have taken into account how features of the mentality sphere may contribute to explain not only why witchcraft trials took place, but also the way witchcraft trials unfolded. When a series of linked witchcraft trials developed, as the North Berwick trials did, the idea of witches' gatherings underpins the process. My novel research adds to the existing knowledge of King James' baggage when coming back to his home country in May 1590. The new ideas may also have influenced the writing of King James' demonological treatise, partly written in the aftermath of the North Berwick trials, which had an immense impact on Scottish witch-hunting practice thereafter.

Conclusion

This article has described a specific transmission of ideas. By cross-cutting letters and documents, a timeline has been established that clarifies the train of events, within each of the countries involved, as well as transnationally. A multitude of voices have emerged from legal documents and state papers, creating a multi-layered tale. By closely examining the linguistic—and very often narrative—practices that the sources give access to, it is possible to follow both the written and oral routes travelled by ideas about witchcraft. In this multitude of situations where people sail, meet, and marry, are imprisoned, interrogated, tortured, and convicted, there were early intimations in Denmark about the reason for the naval fleet's blunder, and people were looking for answers. This is where witchcraft, and women enter the stage. An explanation is construed to reduce the ineptitude of powerful men, unable to carry out their plan. Responsibility is shifted away from men with power to women who allegedly wield another type of power: they are purported to be

¹⁴⁵ Brian P. Levack, "Absolutism, State-building and Witchcraft," in *Witch-Hunting in Scotland*, 101, 108–113; Goodare, "Witchcraft in Scotland," 306.

adept in the art of witchcraft. They became the scapegoats blamed for the fleet's bad fortune. But this is not enough. There is even talk of an attack against the highest ranking royals, the Danish King, and the King and Queen of Scotland.

The stories that crossed the North Sea did not fall on stony ground. The women's wicked deeds formed the starting point for the North Berwick trials. The parallel threat was clear: yet again there were sorcerous plans for an attack against the King. When we examine the re-narrations and reconstructions found in the correspondence of state officials, court documents, and oral accounts, we see a coherent narrative emerge. This narrative is about fear. It is about the manipulation of evil forces through supernatural powers. It is about a world view that explains unexpected disasters, not by resorting to reasoning, but to magic. It is also about perfectly prosaic matters that see a cause-and-effect relationship end up with blaming the powerless. It is about gender relations and women's vulnerability. It is also about royal vulnerability. It is the many layers of the narrative about witchcraft performed against the King's ship, and how these ideas are transferred to Scotland, that reveal the political dimensions to the fleet's turnaround in the North Sea and the implications with respect to the history of mentality. While the fleet was struggling in the North Sea, reportedly surrounded by devilish Apostles, a political drama was unfolding in parallel; backstage we catch a glimpse of wounded vanity, loss of honour, and stately intrigue personified, here in Melville's words: "Quhilk storm and wind was alleged to have been raisit by the witches of Denmark What moved them was a cuff, or blow, quhilk the Admiral of Denmark gave to ane [one] of the baillies of Copenhagen, whose wife being a notable witch, consulted her cummers [fellows], and raised the said storm to be revengit upon the said Admiral."¹⁴⁶

The same come to the fore in the aftermath of the North Berwick witchcraft trials, and I will give Patrick Anderson the last words: "*And indeed these mens opinions are confirmed by certane Magicians and Witches taken after th[a]t in Scotland, who confessed openly at there tryalls, that they had raised these stormes to dryve the Queene frome the coasts of Scotland and th[a]t the Earle of*

¹⁴⁶ Melville, *Memoirs*, 327.

Bothwell had consulted with them concerning the kings end.”
[Author’s italics.]¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ National Library of Scotland, Special Collections, Adv. Ms. 35.5.3.