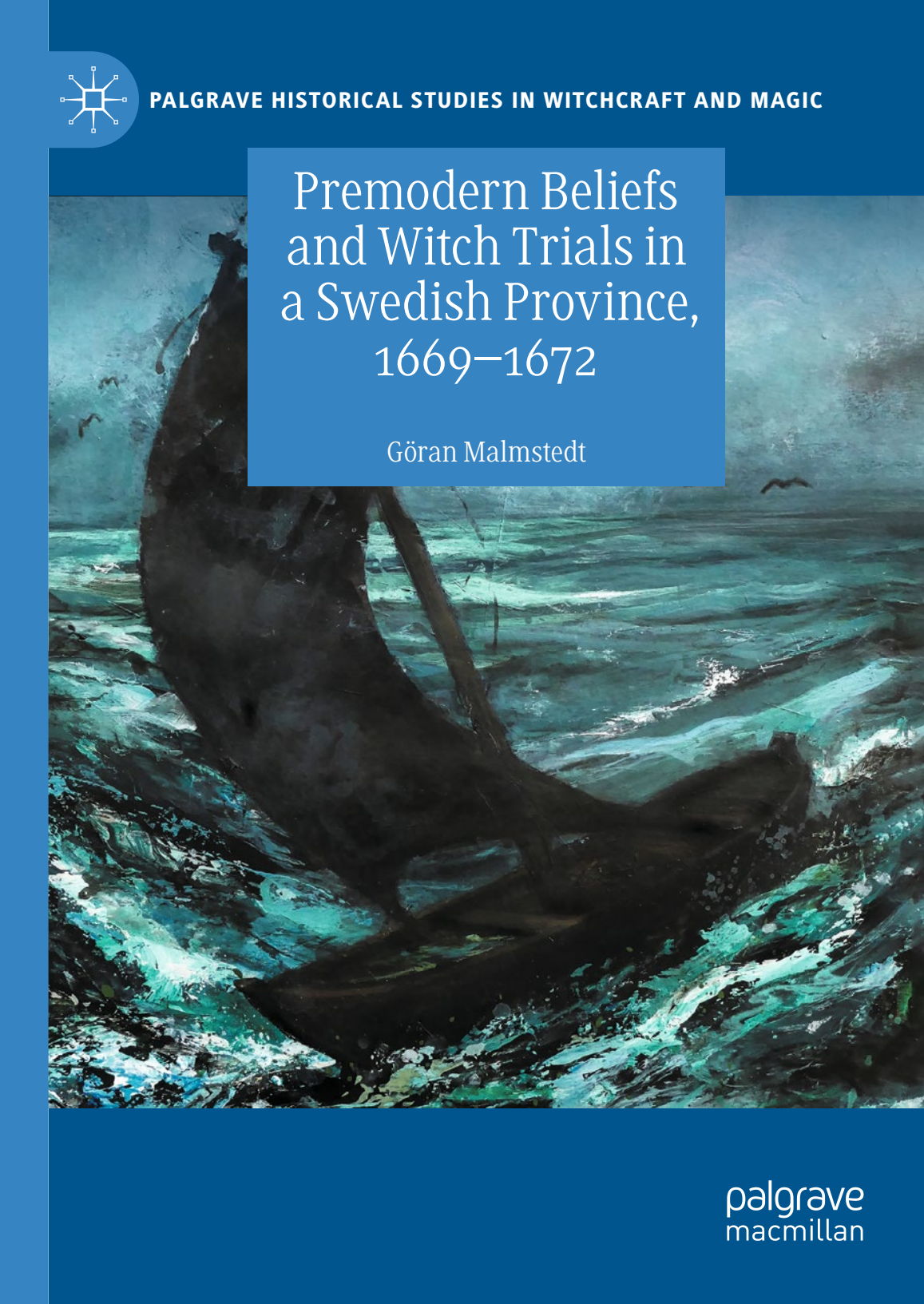
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

It all began in the small town of Marstrand when Sören Murmästare in June 1669 accused Anna i Holta of having made him impotent. He made the accusation in Marstrand Town Court, saying that both he and his wife were certain Anna had deprived him of his manhood when she visited them at home. Although it is not explicitly mentioned in the court record, it is clear that Sören was accusing Anna of witchcraft and that she was infamous and probably feared for her skills. The court decided that she should be kept under arrest before she was interrogated, and over the next few days, several other people came forward to make serious accusations against her.[1]

According to my editor the title of my original book should be mentioned in the front notes that explain it is a translation and include the name of the translator: Originally published in Swedish as En förtrollad värld. Förmoderna föreställningar ochbohuslänska trolldomsprocesser 1669–1672. Nordic Academic Press 2018. Translation by Charlotte Merton.

[1] Lars Svenungsson, *Rannsakningarna om trolldomen i Bohuslän 1669–1672* (1970) (hereafter *Rannsakningarna*), 20–7 and notes; Landsarkivet i Vadstena (VaLA) (Regional State Archives, Vadstena), Göta Hovrätt, Huvudarkivet E V aa Criminalia (GHA), 8 June 1669, fols. 1–5. Sören said Anna had gone over to the bed where he was lying and ran her hand 'Down over his bare body and his secret member, and spoke teasingly to him, among which things she said she would take his cock from him'. When she left the house and met Sören's

G. Malmstedt, *Premodern Beliefs and Witch Trials in a Swedish Province, 1669–1672*, Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-76120-2_1

Signe Larsdotter said that when she had refused to lend Anna some yeast a fortnight before, Anna had wished her ill three times, and soon after her daughter fell ill, 'so she now lies there like a worm for bait and wastes away. This she completely imputed to Anna, and said she was the cause of it.'[2]

Malin i Lunden blamed Anna for several accidents that had befallen her and her family. Among other things, she said her daughter and husband had nearly had their throats ripped out by Anna disguised as a brindled cat. Anna was also accused by both Kirstin Anders Mölners and Bengta Lars Spelemans of having caused their husbands' deaths and by Inger Persdotter of having caused her aquavit still to fail on two separate occasions. All of Anna's accusers were women, and each allegation was about traditional magic, where the suspect was said to have caused illness or death or to have disrupted important household business.[3]

The seriousness of the accusations meant the court interrogated Anna harshly, and after a couple of days, she accused another woman in the town of witchcraft. This was Ragnille Jens Svenses, whom the court soon had in prison for questioning. Later during cross-examination, she in turn named a large number of women who were skilled in witchcraft, some of whom lived outside Marstrand in other parts of the province of Bohuslän. In this way, one original case spiralled into a series of large witch trials, which spread out to various parts of Bohuslän in the coming years. By the time the trials ended in 1672, no fewer than twenty-eight people had been executed, at least a dozen more had died as a result of their harsh treatment, and a few had committed suicide in prison. The vast majority of those accused and executed were women, but there were also a small number of men among the victims.

The Bohuslän trials took place at the time of the far larger witch-hunts in the provinces of Dalarna and Norrland and in the capital Stockholm, where a great many people were tried and executed. The period when most of the Swedish witch trials took place was relatively brief, from 1668 to 1676. The Swedish witch-hunts have been the subject of several major historical investigations from a variety of perspectives, yet the Bohuslän trials have not been considered in detail since Emanuel Linderholm's study was published in 1918.[4]

wife at the door, Anna said, 'Now, I was in there and took your husband's cock.' After which Sören was struck with stomach pains as if 'he had been full of kittens, and soon he lost his manhood' (VaLA, GHA 8 June 1669, fol. 1).

[2] *Rannsakningarna*, 23; VaLA, GHA 10 June 1669, fols. 2.

[3] *Rannsakningarna*, 23–4; VaLA, GHA 10 June and 21 June 1669, fols. 2–5.

[4] Emanuel Linderholm, *De stora häxprocesserna i Sverige: bidrag till svensk kulturoch kyrkohistoria*, i: *Inledning: Bohuslän* (1918). Bohuslän trials are mentioned by Per Sörlin in

The difference between the Bohuslän trials and the rest was not only one of scope; there were also important differences in content. In Bohuslän, the court cases almost only concerned *maleficium*, or malevolent magic, and pacts with the Devil. There were the same accusations in Dalarna and Norrland, of course, but there the trials generally centred on stories of witches abducting children and carrying them off to meet the Devil at Blåkulla, Sweden's mythical place for witches' sabbats.

The focus of my study is the Bohuslän trials, using the official records of the hearings held there between 1669 and 1672. I am not concerned in this instance with the trials themselves, nor yet their causes and consequences, but rather the worldview and perceptions of reality that lay behind it. This is a book about ways of thinking, about the ideas that made the witch trials possible, but which were also part of a general mentality that characterised people's perception of the world, both before and after the trials. In the hearings, the accused were subjected to prolonged cross-examination. Their statements, together with accusations, testimony, and the courts' questions, give a unique insight into premodern worldviews. My aim by examining the court records from the Bohuslän trials is to get closer to ordinary people in that era and different aspects of their perceptions of reality.

The Enchanted World

It was Max Weber's theory that Western society in the premodern period underwent a rationalisation process which saw magic, mystery, and the supernatural supplanted as explanations of the world by a more rational, scientific approach. The world eventually became disenchanted, as Weber put it. However, the question of why and how fast this change came about has always been controversial, and it has long been recognised that it was far from straightforward and even included stages of re-enchantment.[5]

In any case, the seventeenth-century world can certainly be called enchanted. The Christian worldview in all its variety formed the framework for thinking in Europe, and culture in all essentials was shaped by religion and a general belief in the supernatural. The whole of existence was permeated by unearthly forces, which could manifest themselves in various forms. God was a constant presence in the world, and the well-being of humankind was ultimately dependent on his will, whether

his thesis *Trolldoms- och vidskepelsemål i Göta hovrätt 1635–1754* (1993) and in Sörlin (1999), a revised English translation. He has also given a brief account in *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft*, Sörlin (2006a, 135–6). The literature on the Swedish trials is discussed below.

[5] Walsham (2008, 526–8).

expressed in nature or communicated in other ways. The Devil and his demons were the evil forces at large in a world where humans might meet any number of supernatural beings, whether angels, the souls of the dead, ghosts, trolls, elemental creatures such as fairies and sprites, and other mythical spirits.[6]

Interpretative Frameworks

In any culture where religion and magic were distinctive of its worldview, explanations were sought for everything that happened, and little was ascribed to pure coincidence.[7]

Unusual occurrences, which to modern, secular minds would be random events, were attributed a deeper meaning, linked to the supernatural forces thought to influence all aspects of life. It also called for general vigilance, as anything out of the ordinary might be a warning or an omen. Everyone, however educated they were, speculated about the meaning of unusual natural phenomena and other strange events. Crown and Church did their best to read the signs and understand what they presaged, and in the seventeenth century popular prophets often referred in their teachings to various forms of omens and revelations.[8]

Witches, or as they were called in Sweden at the time *trollkonor* and *trollkarlar* (lit. 'magic crones' and 'magic men'), were thought to have the power to cause accidents and make both humans and animals sick. They were also believed to have the ability to disrupt important household doings, and in some cases even command the weather. According to the Church and its demonology, witches drew all their power from the Devil, but that view was not shared by everyone. Several historians have pointed out that the Devil did not always have as prominent a role in popular beliefs about witchcraft.[9]

[6] Evidence of the very real notions of supernatural beings are to be found in seventeenth-century court cases of sexual contact between humans and elemental beings. See Mikael Häll's thesis, *Skogsråret, näcken och djävulen: Erotiska naturväsen och demonisk sexualitet i 1600- och 1700-talens Sverige* (2013).

[7] See, for example, Mitchell (2011, 41) who says in a 'magical worldview' nothing is thought to happen by coincidence or at random.

[8] For central government repeatedly taking unnatural events as warnings, see Malmstedt (1994, 181–91); for the attention given to unusual phenomena and omens, see, for example, Linderholm (1910), Sandblad (1942), Håkansson (2014, 66–75), Gustafsson (2018).

[9] See, for example, Bever (2013, 56–7), Ankarloo (2007, 123–4), Briggs (2002, 330).

Generally speaking, the business of witchcraft was accidents that affected individuals, while it was usual to seek other explanations for collective disasters.[10] When entire regions or even whole kingdoms faced severe adversity, whether crop failure and famine or plague and other epidemics, the common belief was that it should be seen as God's punishment. In the seventeenth century, the Church and the Crown held resolutely to the line that the three scourges of famine, pestilence, and war visited on Sweden were God's punishment for the sins of the people. This was at its core a contractual relationship with God, and if the people broke the covenant, there was the threat of collective punishment. This seems to have been a widespread belief, but nevertheless, there were some popular interpretations of God's wrath that deviated from official doctrine.[11]

While the general mindset falls outside the scope of this study, some of its more prominent features should nevertheless be mentioned here. According to a number of historians, in the past there was often a notion of limited good. In the Nordic tradition, this was closely linked to the popular concept of luck. Luck involved success or good fortune, and was something that was both personal and specific, in the sense of being lucky in love or life.[12]

The quantity of luck has at times been thought a constant, meaning that if one person's good fortune increased, it was assumed to have decreased for others. This was especially true of peasant communities with a static economy. The notion of limited good could spark concerns about witchcraft when a neighbour's cows began to give more milk or when good luck appeared unevenly distributed in other ways.

Another key feature of the premodern worldview was a willingness to find explanations in analogies and parallels of various kinds. The starting point for this was a holistic approach of a kind which held that all levels of existence were interconnected.[13] Examples of this way of thinking included the belief that celestial bodies affected life on Earth in a variety of ways and that human health was dependent on the balance between various body fluids or 'humours'. These explanatory models were combined with the action of supernatural forces, but they were also framed in terms of natural contexts. Not everything was explained with reference to supernatural

[10] Briggs (2002, 97).
[11] Malmstedt (1994).
[12] Östling (2002, 89–93), Alver (2008, 55), Nildin-Wall and Wall (1996, 31–47).
[13] See, for example, Briggs (2002, 327–8).

powers. In the case of illness, for example, it was usually only in unclear circumstances or the presence of certain symptoms that suspicion of witchcraft was raised, and otherwise common ailments were explained in terms of more natural causes.[14]

The Role of Magic

Various forms of magical acts had an important role in Sweden's premodern culture. Magic is difficult to define and its meaning has varied according to time and place, added to which it was often used pejoratively. Church leaders were not averse to using the term 'magical' to criticise practices in competing doctrines or to label traditional beliefs or rites as godless. Those accused of practising magic or of approaching others to do it for them usually described what they did in the idiom of knowledge.[15]

Despite everything, the term magic is still used by historians, because it can still be useful when pinning down certain ideas and beliefs. In what follows, magic is used in a broad sense for activities designed to invoke or direct supernatural forces in order to achieve specific goals.[16]

The belief was there were two distinct types of magic: *maleficium* and benevolent magic. Harmful magic was synonymous with witchcraft. Beneficial magic, which the Church often called superstition, was used to cure diseases in animals and humans, trace lost property, predict the future, and provide protection against *maleficium*. Those who practised the useful kind were often called *kloka*, 'wise', a term that survived into modern times. When brought to justice accused of magical crimes, they often insisted it had been an act of piety and that they derived what power they had from God. At times it seems they were genuinely surprised that their brand of benevolent magic might be considered criminal.[17]

Wise women and wise men probably commanded respect for their skill, but it is also likely that the general attitude towards them was ambivalent. Anyone who was able to ward off *maleficium* laid themselves open to the accusation of being equally skilled in the sort of magic that was a danger

[14] Wilson (2000, 311–15).

[15] Clark (2002, 105–11), Oja (1999, 171–2).

[16] For definitions of magic, see, for example, Sharpe (2004, 440–3) and Mitchell (2011, 12–13), who argue that supernatural forces are central to any definition, while the form it takes (imploring, manipulative, etc.) is less significant.

[17] Wall (1989, 190–1), Oja (1999, 189–93) who uses 'harmless magic', also refers occasionally to 'benevolent magic', which is the term I have settled for.

to others.[18] Spiritual and secular rulers have long regarded benevolent magic, in principle, just as criminal as *maleficium*, considering that both forms required people to consort with the Devil. This was not a view shared by the populace, though, as was evident from the fact that it was largely priests and government officials who reported those who practised this form of magic.[19]

To call the worldview of the seventeenth-century 'premodern' could imply it was an imperfect realisation compared to its modern iteration.[20] In earlier research, it happens that the premodern worldview is presented as undeveloped or deficient, because people then lacked the knowledge of nature we have now. Magic is described as expressing false perceptions of reality, a substitute for a fully realised, functioning technology—in other words, people in the past were trapped with their irrational beliefs. As Stuart Clark and other historians have pointed out, this is anachronistic and reductionist about past perceptions of the world.[21]

Magic was entirely rational by the standards of their worldview, and what we now think of as falsehoods or knowledge gaps were for them reasonable meaning-making contexts. Magical thinking can be described as a particular conception of causality and is found in most cultures. Even in modern Western society, it is possible to find traces of magical thinking, not only in children (for whom it is a natural phase) but in adults. It is why developmental psychologists and other researchers have argued that it is in fact a universal phenomenon, integral to human nature.[22]

Witch Trials in Europe

The belief that there were wicked people who had magical powers and used them to cause accidents, injury, and illness was widespread, and indeed, it lives on in some places to this today. In this sense, belief in witches is common to human history, and there are numerous parallels

[18] See, for example, Clark (2002, 112–13).

[19] Sörlin (1993, 87, 94–6), Oja (2005, 324–7).

[20] Western modernity is usually said to have originated in the late eighteenth century and the Enlightenment, with antiquity and the medieval and early modern periods then characterised as premodern, complete with appropriately magical–religious worldview. For a discussion of how the premodern relates to the modern, see, for example, Österberg (2009).

[21] For a critique of the anachronistic interpretations of magic and the premodern worldview, see Clark (1983, 2002, 106–8).

[22] Bever (2012), see also Briggs (2002, 328).

between Christian Europe and other cultures.[23] Where Europe stands out, however, is in the witch-hunts that raged in the premodern period. There had been times in the Middle Ages when people were accused and punished for practising *maleficium*, but the principal witch trials took place in a limited period, from the later sixteenth century until the mid-eighteenth century, culminating in continental Europe between 1560 and 1660.

In the late Middle Ages, ecclesiastical and scholarly circles adopted a new conception of witches. Where before they had been thought of as practitioners of *maleficium*, now they were also feared as participants in a far-flung conspiracy against Christianity under the leadership of the Devil. The new concept had evolved as a result of the wholesale persecution of heretics in the medieval period. The belief that there were secret societies which threatened Christians, and regularly congregated to plan their conspiracies and indulge in grotesque orgies, became attached to the concept of witchcraft. From the mid-fifteenth century, a large number of theological and legal textbooks enlarged on this new way of viewing of witches.

One example is the famous *Malleus Maleficarum* of 1486, commonly known as the *Hammer of Witches*. The novel elements were that witches were said to be wholly dependent for their power on a pact with the Devil and that all witches were part of a wider conspiracy against Christendom. Both of these beliefs would prove crucial in future.

Where and When

It would not be until the mid-sixteenth century that the first large-scale witch-hunts flared up. By this time the Reformation had split the Western Church in two, and Christians had been divided into a number of confessions. At the same time, the premodern princely states were growing stronger, and in several places princes and clerical leaders joined forces to monitor their subjects' orthodoxy. On the most general level, these developments fed into the rise of the witch trials, but it is not possible to establish a clear causal link.[24]

There were large regional variations in the witch-hunts. Some parts of Europe were hit hard with mass executions on an unprecedented scale,

[23] Behringer (2004, 1–3, ch. 2).

[24] See, for example, Monter (2002, 10–11). As Ankarloo (2007, 131) and others have pointed out, there is no universal answers for something as complicated as the witch trials.

but in other areas relatively few were sentenced to death. There were no evident differences along confessional lines: there were witch trials in both Catholic and various Protestant regions. However, historians agree that the worst-affected areas were in the Holy Roman Empire, where it is estimated over half of all executions in Europe took place.[25] A common explanation for why things took such a dramatic turn there is that judicial systems in Germany's many small sovereign principalities were often weak, with few opportunities for judicial review.[26]

As a rule, where legal systems had higher courts they generally had a dampening effect on the worst excesses of the witch trials. The Inquisition had a similar effect: in all its various national forms, it was sceptical of witchcraft accusations and thus greatly contributed to the relatively low number of executions in the Mediterranean region. This was especially true of Portugal, where only seven people were executed as witches, but the numbers were also low in much of Spain and Italy.[27]

As witch-hunting began to abate in continental Europe in the mid-seventeenth century, it flared up in parts of northern Europe and again in the early eighteenth century in eastern Europe. After 1750, there were no significant witch trials in Europe. Modern research estimates the number executed as witches to have been 40,000–50,000 from the late Middle Ages to the end of the eighteenth century, the majority of whom (some 30,000–35,000) fell victim to the trials at the height of the witch-hunts, between 1560 and 1660.[28]

Women were the hardest hit. It is generally accepted that 70–80 per cent of all people executed for witchcraft were women. Yet although they invariably made up the majority of the accused, in all regions studied, men too were executed as witches.[29]

In some parts of Europe, the gender balance was even, and there were occasionally trials where men made up the majority of those convicted and

[25] Behringer (2004, 156), William Monter (2002, 16) who claims that from 1560 to 1660 the number of executions in German-speaking areas amounted to almost three-quarters of the total in Europe.

[26] See, for example, Levack (2013a, 6).

[27] Monter (2002, 44–9), 14 (Portugal). In seventeenth-century Spain, an inquisitor stepped in and, despite opposition from local officials, prevented a very large trial, directing sharp criticism at the general credibility of the trials (Henningsen 1987).

[28] Behringer (2004, 156–7) and Monter (2002, 16) estimate a total of 30,000–35,000 were executed in 1560–1660.

[29] Rowlands (2013, 450, 464).

executed—as was the case in Estonia, parts of Finland, and Iceland.[30] The question of why primarily women were the victims of witch trials has long been a bone of contention among historians. Various explanations have been advanced, from the feminist to the social and the psychoanalytic, which take due notice of theologians' misogyny, society's patriarchal structure, and women's traditional responsibility for the health of the household.[31] In modern research, however, there is no generally accepted reason, although everyone agrees that women were far more vulnerable in patriarchal societies; to be complete, it would have to explain why men too were convicted as witches, and why witch-hunts gained momentum and slowed at different times across Europe.

Shifting Causes

As seen, the high point of the witch trials coincided with several key social changes: the Reformation, strengthened princely power, a general economic and demographic transformation. There is broad agreement among historians that it is impossible to determine simple causal relationships, as the trials were complex phenomena with large regional variations which cannot be said to come down to a single factor.[32] In earlier research, witch trials were sometimes depicted as purely government concerns, for which Church and state alone were responsible. It has since become clear that as a rule there was also popular unease that helped fuel the witch-hunts, while in some cases the authorities acted reluctantly and only under pressure of local opinion.[33] It has been shown that the authorities and the victims' neighbours were to varying degrees the prime movers in witch trials. In some cases, local elites also played a leading role.

It was only when certain conditions were in place that a major witch trial became likely. One example was the witches' pact with the Devil: it had to be generally believed in, at least by the local authorities. Once people were convinced that witches were part of a huge conspiracy and regularly consorted with the Devil, it was a short step to arresting a witch to extract information about all other witches in the area. It was the reason

[30] Behringer (2004, 158). In Iceland 90 per cent of those executed were men, in Estonia 60 per cent, and in Finland 50 per cent; however, in Finland, they were 75 per cent of those executed in the sixteenth century (Ankarloo 2007, 146).

[31] See, for example, Rowlands (2013), Behringer (2004, 37–43), Sharp (2004, 449).

[32] See, for example, Briggs (1996, 2002, 4).

[33] Behringer (2004, 3–4).

why the trials were able to expand so rapidly. Also, courts were required to use torture and take a generally inquisitorial approach—the truth was something to be wrung from people with cross-examinations and witnesses, even when the plaintiff or prosecutor were not present.[34] However, not all areas where these conditions existed saw witch trials. Certain triggers were needed, and as they could vary from case to case that in turn had an impact on the form and course taken by the trials.

Several historians have drawn attention to the important role played by lawyers in bringing the witch trials to an end. As time and the trials went on, lawyers in many places were increasingly reluctant to sentence people to death on the grounds given, which effectively halted executions.[35] Another reason why the trials ceased was the dawning realisation among princes and church leaders, after a wave of hearings and executions, that trials could escalate exponentially, creating instability as they went. The execution of witches came to a close not because of a change of worldview or dwindling belief in the supernatural. It was only in the eighteenth century that wider sections of society stopped believing in witches and witchcraft, long after the first trials had been consigned to history.

Witch Trials in Sweden, 1668–1676

The modern Swedish word for witch, *häxa*, was not in general use in the 1670s; it was a German loan word which first arrived at the end of the seventeenth century. It was usual instead to talk of witches as *trollkonor* or *trollpackor* and wizards as *trollkarlar*, and it was thought, as the names for them showed, that both sexes could engage in the dark arts and indeed that it was possible to distinguish between male and female practitioners. The Swedish usages also indicate witches had originally been associated with trolls. Originally, however, trolls were not synonymous with the figures we know from fairy stories and in the distant past had referred to demons of a sort that could take both male and female forms.[36]

[34] Ankarloo (2007, 87). However, like England and the rest of northern Europe, Sweden normally had an adversarial system with two independent parties (the plaintiff and the defendant) and neutral judge. Swedish national law was predicated on an individual plaintiff in *maleficium* cases, but the more prominent the religious character of the crime the more the authorities' representatives acted as prosecutors, but even so it was still formally an adversarial trial.

[35] Levack (2013b, 444).

[36] Raudvere (2003, 37–8).

There is a range of literature on the Swedish witch trials.[37] A century ago, the church historian Emanuel Linderholm published a study of the trials in Bohuslän: a thorough, detailed account of events in that part of Sweden in 1669–1672.[38] The Bohuslän cases are also discussed in Per Sörlin's thesis about superstition and witch trials in the Göta Court of Appeal between 1635 and 1754, although they were not his particular focus.[39] The standard work on the Swedish witch trials, though, is Bengt Ankarloo's *Trolldomsprocesserna i Sverige*. True, Ankarloo concentrates on the key trials of the seventeenth century, but he nevertheless gives an account of the criminal status of witchcraft in Sweden from the Middle Ages to the end of the seventeenth century. Other studies include Birgitta Lagerlöf-Génetay's thesis on the initial phase of the Swedish witch-hunts and the background to the trials in upper Dalarna, and Marie Lennersand and Linda Oja's comprehensive study of what happened to those involved after the trials had ended.

In the Middle Ages, witchcraft in Sweden was mainly a question of *maleficium*, with accusations of witchcraft said to have harmed people or animals, often in such a way as to kill the victims. The Devil was rarely mentioned, and most of the cases concerned solitary individuals.[40] Ankarloo argues that until the mid-sixteenth century there was no trace of the idea of witchcraft as it had evolved in continental Europe, but towards the end of the century the new beliefs about witchcraft, complete with pacts with the Devil and witches' sabbats, were gaining traction in Sweden too.[41]

Trials in the North

The first large witch trials in Sweden were held in the province of Dalarna in 1668 and soon spread into neighbouring Hälsingland and on northwards before finally appearing in central Sweden in Stockholm. That too was where the series of trials ended, when in 1676 the sceptical members of one of the witchcraft commissions got several children to admit that

[37] For accounts in English of the Swedish witch trials, see Ankarloo (1990) and Sörlin (2006b, 1092–6).

[38] Linderholm (1918).

[39] Sörlin (1993).

[40] Ankarloo (2007, 150–4).

[41] Ankarloo (1984, 63, 2007, 155, 169–70).

they had deliberately lied about their experiences. By then some 240 people had been executed in nine years of trials in northern and central Sweden.[42]

In most of the cases there, people were accused of abducting children and carrying them off to Blåkulla for a sabbat with the Devil. This meant the children's eternal souls were in jeopardy, which terrified parents. Thousands of children appeared as witnesses, and in some cases, groups of children and adolescents seem to have denounced witches for money. Suspects were often brutally interrogated, and it was not unknown for the court to work from a list of prepared questions which the accused need only answer.[43] It seems torture was routine, but because it was not legally sanctioned, it was rarely mentioned in the court record.[44]

Public opinion often played a large role in the trials in northern and central Sweden, where in several places there were calls for the government to step in and put a decisive end to witchcraft. It is known that in some cases panicked neighbours took matters into their own hands and assaulted suspected witches. Local elites were probably prime movers in this, according to Ankarloo, and especially the clergy. There were instances of priests actively tracking down suspects, and they also served as witnesses and interrogators in the hearings.[45] Recent research suggests that some trials may have escalated because of conflicts between the clergy and other members of the local elite.[46] However, it should be remembered that there were clerics who actively discouraged the rumours of witchcraft and tried to prevent the trials in the first place.[47] Moreover, a couple of priests were pivotal in the work of the witchcraft commissions, which revealed the false testimony in the Stockholm hearings and thus helped put an end to proceedings.[48]

It is not clear what the connection was between the witch trials in northern and central Sweden and those in the west coast province of

[42] There were also twenty-eight who were executed in Bohuslän to add to that total, along with sixty-six sentenced to death for witchcraft in the Finnish areas of the kingdom in 1660–1680, with a peak in the 1670s in Österbotten (Heikkinen and Kervinen 1987, 276–91).

[43] For prepared lists of leading questions, see Ankarloo (1984, 114–15).

[44] Ankarloo (1984, 256–62).

[45] Ankarloo (1984, 314–23).

[46] Wallenberg-Bondesson (2003, 118–24).

[47] Lennersand and Oja (2006, 395), Östling (2002, 290).

[48] Ankarloo (1984, 334).

Bohuslän in 1669–1672. People in Bohuslän would have known of the dramatic events further north, even if the trials did not take a similar direction. In Bohuslän, after all, there were no accusations of child abduction, and the Devil's sabbat was accorded far less significance in the hearings. Cross-examinations do not seem to have followed lists of questions, unlike the rest of the country, although plainly the court was particularly interested in certain subjects. Neither does it seem there was the popular outrage seen in the north of Sweden. In other words, the witch trials were not directed to the same extent by the suspects' neighbours or others in the local community. As Bohuslän had only been ceded to Sweden by Denmark as recently as 1658, Danish-Norwegian laws still applied in some areas. This meant that under certain circumstances torture was permitted in witchcraft cases and could be mentioned openly in the court record.[49]

The Purpose and Organisation of the Book

The main purpose of this book is to study the worldview that underpinned belief in witchcraft. The witch trials themselves, for all their causes and consequences, are not my subject. The motives of the most ardent witch-hunters, the learnt beliefs about witchcraft are also of less interest since they have been described in detail elsewhere. Rather, my focus is the general conception of the world and the performance of supernatural forces. What were people's perceptions of reality when life had to offer a variety of supernatural phenomena? How did people think they should articulate the supernatural? How did they imagine witchcraft worked? These and other related questions are what I set out to answer in this book.

A worldview analysis, however, requires an understanding of the circumstances of the witch trials and especially the statements made in court. For that reason the Bohuslän hearings are examined in some detail in the introductory chapters. Here the book can also help shed light on the history of witch trials. As the detailed court records give the witnesses' and defendants' statements in full, to the point where individuals come to

[49] However, torture was only permitted after the verdict was pronounced (Johansen 1991, 22). Nonetheless, there are several known cases, at least from Norway, where the court, in the same way as in Bohuslän, resorted to torture during the interrogations before any verdict was handed down (Næss 2006, 838). According to Linderholm, it is possible that the court in such cases meant that ordinary rules could be overlooked since witchcraft was considered a *crimen læsæ maiestatis divinae*, and the witch thus being a traitor to God (Linderholm 1918, 71–3).

light, complete with names and seemingly authentic voices, I aim to bring to life the human destinies found in the material.

The book is divided into four parts, of which the first concerns the Bohuslän hearings. Since Linderholm's account of the trials themselves is so thorough, I give only a broad outline of the design and course of the proceedings, before focusing on the accused with a study of how they became involved, and the ways in which popular and scholarly opinion joined forces in the hearings. This part ends with a longer chapter to address how one of the trials' most complex witchcraft stories was constructed over the course of the cross-examination—a tale of witches and wizards who shape-shifted into birds and flew out over the North Sea to attack and sink a fishing boat from the fishing village of Mollösund—to show how the court gradually built up a diabolical story (literally, as it featured the Devil) with elements taken from folk tradition and the scholarly pattern of witch belief. It also points to the subject of all the subsequent chapters, which consider contemporary perceptions of reality and the worldviews operationalised over the course of the trial narratives.

The second part of the book, 'Dimensions of Reality', thus deals with dreams and the belief that certain people could shape-shift. The two chapters address contemporary notions of the various layers or dimensions of reality. The third part, 'Magic Domains', is about the various areas where magical forces were thought to work, examining witchcraft and emotion, the magical power of words, and the belief that objects could hold a magical charge. The fourth part, 'Supernatural Powers', considers popular beliefs about God and the Devil heard in the trials. The book ends with a discussion in which various aspects of the perception of reality in the premodern period are linked together.

Previous Research

Neither the worldview nor the themes that are my subject have featured much in previous studies of the Swedish witch trials. Per-Anders Östling's thesis *Blåkulla, magi och trolldomsprocesser* ('Bläkulla, magic, and witch trials') is an exception. Östling has investigated an extensive range of material from central and northern Sweden, including the witchcraft cases that came before the Svea Court of Appeal (1597–1720), the work of the witchcraft commissions, and popular beliefs or folklore in the same regions. Taking a notably broad approach, Östling addresses a great many issues. His analysis of Blåkulla and the witches' sabbat is central to his argument,

but he also touches on a number of topics with a bearing on the same premodern worldview that I address in my research. Birgitta Lagerlöf-Génetay's study of the early stages of the Dalarna witch trials is also relevant here. Although she is primarily concerned with social factors, her analysis also includes popular beliefs such as the legends about Blåkulla.[50] Witchcraft and magic in the premodern worldview have also been discussed by Jan-Inge Wall in a couple of publications, centring on the witch trials on Gotland and in Dalarna.[51]

There are a number of useful studies of magic and superstition in Sweden in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that are relevant here. The long period which Per Sörlin analyses for his thesis about superstition and witch trials in the Göta Court of Appeal makes it possible to interpret the Bohuslän cases in a larger chronological context. Although it is not the focus of his research, Sörlin also addresses popular beliefs about witchcraft and white magic. Another important work which covers the same period is Linda Oja's thesis *Varken Gud eller natur* ('Neither God nor nature'), a study of Swedish attitudes and beliefs about magic as evinced in the legal record and scholarly texts. As part of her investigation, she addresses how far popular opinion about white or benevolent magic deviated from the official view, and the extent to which confidence in magic's efficacy waned among the social elite over the course of the eighteenth century. The natural sciences then gained a stronger position, and they sought natural explanations for phenomena that had previously been interpreted magically. The importance of the Devil was diminished: clerics and lawyers were less inclined to attribute physical agency to him. By the late eighteenth century the new beliefs were having an impact on legislation, as *maleficium* was decriminalised and pacts with the Devil were reinterpreted as superstition rather than witchcraft.[52] It could be said some of the enchantment went out of the official worldview.

As Jacqueline Van Gent has demonstrated, though, beliefs about witchcraft and magic held steady throughout the eighteenth century in rural Sweden. Using cases heard in the Göta Court of Appeal, Van Gent discusses in *Magic, Body and the Self in Eighteenth-Century Sweden*, how belief in magic was linked to the contemporary connections drawn between the self, the body, and the cosmos. I will have reason to return to these studies later. However, naturally enough, the specialist literature

[50] Lagerlöf-Génetay (1990, 135–47).
[51] Wall (1989), Nildin-Wall and Wall (1996).
[52] Oja (1999, 288–92).

does not touch on every aspect of the Swedish worldview studied here, and so in what follows I do refer to other research where relevant. In other words, I will return to a discussion of the literature.

The Court Record

The source material consists of the records of the courts that heard witchcraft cases—in towns the *rådhusrätter* (town courts) and in rural areas the *häradsting* (district courts), along with the specially appointed *kommissorialrätter* (witchcraft commissions)—and the Göta Court of Appeal. Since these records are central to my argument, it is worth pausing to look at how they were made, their function during the witch trials, and the extent to which they can be thought reliable.

Court records have often been used by historians interested in ordinary people's perceptions and attitudes in the past. As source material it is not without its issues, and scholars have to gauge the extent to which the clerks recorded what was said and done in court. Court records of witch trials present their own special problems, because under normal circumstances the cross-examination was tightly regulated. Suspects and witnesses were often examined with a list of set questions, which led to stereotypical confessions, a problem compounded by the common use of various forms of coercion, without it being clear what had been done and when. The court records from the Bohuslän trials are unusually detailed, however, and the cross-examinations there appear not to have followed a list of questions.[53] The statements made by witnesses and defendants were taken down in such a way as to appear genuine. Moreover, it is spelt out when the court resorted to torture and other coercive methods, making it possible to follow how this affected the statements made by the accused.

The clerks generally seem to have been thorough.[54] There were several reasons why they kept a record of the hearings. One was that it was an important tool for the court during the cross-examinations, which could last for several days. By carefully noting down the testimony of the witnesses and the accused, it could be read back, for example, if the accused deviated from previous statements or tried to change their story. A written court records also gave the court an advantage, which was used on several

[53] It should be noted that they were generally more detailed: the Bohuslän trial records that Lars M. Svenungsson has published run to 300 pages, for example.

[54] Only in a few cases was the name of the clerk noted in the record. One exception, for example, was the Kungälv hearings in 1669, where it is known it was the town clerk.

occasions. Perhaps even more important was that the court record was the basis for any review in the Court of Appeal. What was required was careful documentation of what had happened in the local court.

The court records are not stereotypical, and although the court plainly kept to a similar sequence in the cross-examination, each case took a different course. Generally, the records show what questions were asked in court, but rarely is it noted who did the asking. Questions were formulated in the passive form or were attributed to the court as a whole. In other words, the questioners often remain anonymous, although it can be seen if it was, for example, a priest or the *nämndemän* (lay judges) who had asked the questions.

Witnesses and defendants, meanwhile, appear by name and quoted at length, which gives their statements, with their individual voices, a sense of authenticity. The idiom, rather than strictly legal, is narrative as a rule, and the copious quotes set the tone. The chronology, with a few exceptions, runs uninterrupted, with the course of the cross-examination always described in the standard sequence. The impression is of a court record noted down during proceedings and a fair copy written out soon after. This is borne out by the fact that on a couple of occasions the court used notes from the previous day's cross-examination to convince a defendant of their earlier statements.

Court records are still only an indirect account of what took place in the courtroom, and we can never know how much the clerks edited or corrected events and statements. That said, hearings were usually held in public with at least some of the local populace present, and there were times when sections of the court record were read aloud, which speaks against them giving a deliberately skewed picture. The reliability of the source material is all the greater because it recorded statements that could complicate proceedings and undermine the court's aspirations. Defendants often underwent several cross-examinations, and some at first confessed and then later retracted and acted in a way that weakened the court's position, all of which was reported in the court record. The times defendants claimed their confessions under torture were worthless because they had been forced to 'lie to themselves' were also carefully noted down. The court records' accuracy is also indicated by those occasions when the court or the clerk, unsure what a defendant had said, asked for clarification.

It should be pointed out that the information I draw from the court record is not the same as the facts the court sought to establish or which the accused used in their defence; my purpose is not to determine whether

the accused thought they had used witchcraft, or even whether people thought there were reasonable grounds for prosecution, but rather to show how the court, witnesses, and accused viewed reality and what they imagined the supernatural to be.

The local historian Lars Manfred Svenungsson transcribed and published a wide range of court records and related documents from the Bohuslän trials, broadly corresponding to the source material Linderholm had used for his research.[55] Svenungsson's is an impressive publication and gives an access to the court records that has made my work a great deal easier. Although his edition is largely reliable, it is not without its issues, however, because in some passages he goes from transcription to paraphrase without indicating when, and at times interrupts the text with his own comments.[56] For key moments, it has therefore been necessary to consult the primary sources, and the majority of the quotations in this book are taken from the original documents.[57]

Voices from the Past

It has been my ambition to get close to the hearings and people involved. This inevitably means that a great many names appear in this book, some of them more than once. To help readers who might otherwise find it confusing, I would like to introduce some of the characters who feature more heavily.

[55] Svenungsson (1970) (*Rannsakningarna*).

[56] There are also misreadings of individual words and in several cases the wording has also changed. If Svenungsson's edition has shortcomings in these respects, it nevertheless reproduces the content of the extensive material in general correctly.

[57] I cite both the printed edition and the original document where relevant, giving the original foliation or pagination. Where there are differences, I have given priority to the primary sources over any published transcriptions: the appellate court record, Riksarkivet (RA) (Swedish National Archives), Stockholm, Göta Hovrätt, Huvudarkivet, E V aa Criminalia 1669 (GHA); and the commission's records, RA, Kommission i Bohus län ang. trolldomsväsendet 1670–1671 (hereafter RA, Kommission i Bohuslän); and the commission court's record, RA, Kommissorialrätt i Bohus län ang. trolldomsväsendet (hereafter RA, Kommissorialrätt). The archives offer a variety of materials, from the records of the hearings to judgements in the local courts, the special commissions, and the Court of Appeal. The commission's and commission court's records also contain correspondence.

First and foremost, there was Nils Thomesen Feman. In his capacity as *underlagman* (deputy lawman), he deputised for the local judge, the *lagman* (lawman), and in practice was responsible for the district court. Feman took a very active part in the witch trials and was present at, and often presided over, most of the hearings held across Bohuslän. Despite his prominence, we rarely hear Feman's voice in the court record. He was probably the one who questioned the accused, but as seen, interrogators were usually not mentioned by name in the court record. Feman seems to have blindly believed the stories of pacts with the Devil and, with the help of the local executioner as torturer, was only too willing to investigate new cases wherever they came to light in Bohuslän. He kept a close eye on proceedings to ensure no cases were left unfinished. Most of the large European witch-hunts at the time had their enthusiasts who actively contributed to driving the prosecutions. Feman took on this role in Bohuslän.

In the story of the witches' attack on the fishing boat, there were a couple of important figures whose statements I return to at several points in the book. One of them was Gertrud from Mollösund, described in the court record as a 'widow woman in her sixties'.[58] Judging by her nickname, 'Corporals' (lit. the corporal's), Gertrud had probably been married to a soldier. In the hearings, she was never accused by her neighbours and, unlike several other defendants, she did not appear to have a reputation for witchcraft. However, after harsh questioning, the court persuaded her to admit to a pact with the Devil, and that together with other accusations led to her execution. The same trial also singled out an old fisherman called Per Larsson, who by his own account had lived in Mollösund for sixty years. Unlike Gertrud, it seems Per had long had a reputation for magic. At the hearing his neighbours were reluctant to deny the rumours, and one of them volunteered that Per 'has always been a disagreeable and insolent man, both towards the authorities and others'.[59] He was definitely not shy about speaking his mind, as the court would find out. Per was a widower, and there were rumours of witchcraft about his late wife too. Their daughter Anna was also caught up in the witch-hunt, and both she and her father were sentenced to death and executed.

Elin Andersdotter of Staxäng, a farm in the hundred of Stångenäs, should also be mentioned. One of the first to be investigated for witchcraft in Bohuslän, she was accused of using witchcraft against a customs official

[58] *Rannsakningarna*, 125; VaLA, GHA 25 Oct. 1669, fol. 204.
[59] *Rannsakningarna*, 103; VaLA, GHA 20 Aug. 1669, fol. 252.

from the nearby fishing port of Lysekil, but as the hearing progressed, further accusations were made by others in the community. During her first cross-examination, Elin said she was pregnant, so she was evidently younger than many of the defendants. She and her husband Iver Rearsson had a long-standing reputation for witchcraft, and it was said they would carry out a variety of magic for people. Elin comes across as one of the bravest, strong-willed people to have been tried as a witch. Despite severe questioning that went on for weeks, despite being tortured on the orders of the court, she refused to admit to witchcraft or to consorting with the Devil. She even almost managed to keep her husband out of proceedings. However, in the end both she and Iver were executed.

Finally, there were two women from the island port of Marstrand. The one, Ragnille, had a key role in the early trials, because when questioned she named a large number of people as using witchcraft. There is not much information about Ragnille in the court record. She was referred to as Glanan (lit. the starer), while judging by her name, Jens Svenses (lit. Jens Sven's), she was married or a widow. Several witnesses implied she was notorious for witchcraft, and it seems she herself feared even at an early stage that she would be prosecuted. Marit Byskrivers, another Marstrand resident, features later in the book. It is not known whether her husband, Jörgen Carstensen, was alive—he had been Marstrand's town clerk, hence her name (lit. town clerk's Marit)—but most likely she was a widow by the time proceedings began.[60] One of their adult sons was mentioned by a witness, as will be seen. Like many other suspects, it had been rumoured for years that Marit Byskrivers was a witch.

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PART I

The Bohuslän Witch Trials

CHAPTER 2

The Conduct of the Trials

Witchcraft cases were heard by several courts. Hearings were generally held by local courts, either the *rådhusrätter* (town courts) or, in rural areas, the *häradsrätter* (district courts). A town court was made up of the mayor and aldermen; the district court of six or twelve *lagrättsmän*, the *nämndemän* (lay judges) so central to the Swedish tradition, and a court clerk. Above both town and district courts was the *lagmansting* (provincial court), which, as we have seen, was headed in the period in question by Nils Thomesen Feman.[1]

All verdicts in witchcraft cases were sent to the Göta Court of Appeal in Jönköping, which was responsible for sentencing. In addition, there were three special commissions which heard witchcraft cases in Bohuslän. Only the last Commission attempted thorough investigations, the first two having been short-lived and of limited scope. Hearings and cross-examinations largely followed the same pattern regardless of the trial. Among the standard practices were harassment, confrontational questioning, witness identification, priests testifying in camera, ordeals by water, and torture. It is plain that in all cases the courts were intent on obtaining a confession of a pact with the Devil, even if the original accusation only concerned various forms of witchcraft. It was also necessary to extract an admission of guilt for the court to be able to impose the death penalty.

[1] Linderholm (1918, 74–6).

G. Malmstedt, *Premodern Beliefs and Witch Trials in a Swedish Province, 1669–1672*, Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-76120-2_2

Cross-examination

During the initial cross-examination, the accused heard the accusations and was asked by the court to confess the truth. Only on a handful of occasions did this result in a spontaneous confession, however.[2] For all subsequent cross-examinations, which could extend over days, weeks, and even months, the written court records played an important role. The court had the advantage, because previous statements made by the accused could be read back: it was a way of pinning down even the smallest hint of a confession obtained from the accused. In most cases, the defendant was also confronted with their accuser, who then repeated their testimony to the court. In the majority of cases, this was someone who themselves been accused of witchcraft, and having already confessed now had to testify that the accused had practised witchcraft or met the Devil. It was known for these confrontations to be held during the first cross-examination, but equally they could wait until later, as they existed largely to persuade the accused to confess. At the same time, such testimony gained in credibility when it was repeated in the presence of the accused. There were examples where confrontation led to heated exchanges and mutual accusations of lying. However, it came to be considered the defendant's right to be able to meet their accuser face to face, and on a couple of occasions, the accused complained that they had not been given the opportunity.[3]

As a rule, the local clergy were present for the hearings. When cross-examination or confrontation did not produce the desired results, it was known for priests to speak to the accused in private to extract a confession, whether by taking the accused to one side during the cross-examination or by visiting them in prison. The clergy often also figured in the cross-examination itself either by leading the court in prayer or by asking questions, sometimes even as the accused was being tortured. Clerical involvement varied from place to place, however. The vicar of the island of Orust in central Bohuslän, for example, seems to have been unusually active, joining in the questioning and holding private conversations with defendants, while his fellow priests in the north of Bohuslän played a less

[2] Börta Crämars in Mollösund was one exception, see *Rannsakningarna*, 19 Aug. 1669, 99.

[3] This was what Catharina Bengtsdotter did when brought before the court in July 1671, accused of witchcraft by Elin and Iver i Staxäng. She said they had named her in revenge for a dispute between them, and underlined she had never been allowed to confront her accusers (*Rannsakningarna*, 29 June 1671, 236).

prominent role, although there the rapid pace of the hearings may have relegated the clergy to the background.

Ordeal by Water

The witch trials in Bohuslän stood out for their regular use of ordeal by water. This could take a variety of forms. The commonest was that the suspect's feet and hands were tied across their chest, attached to a longer rope used to cast them into the water and pull them out again. In some cases, the suspect was simply thrown into the water unbound; in others, all their hair was cut off to prevent them from hiding magical charms there.[4] The innocent were expected to sink, while those who floated were considered able to do so only with the help of the Devil. The ordeal, although primarily thought an indication and not outright evidence, was often cited in the verdicts of the local courts and the Court of Appeal.[5]

Usually, the public executioner was in charge of the ordeal itself, and the very fact of coming into contact with him brought shame on the suspect. This was probably why some defendants asked to be thrown into the water by close relatives, such as a spouse or children, so that they would not have to be touched by the executioner—although it may also have been because they suspected the executioner somehow stage-managed the ordeal to guarantee they would float. In several cases, such requests were granted, and when the accused floated even so, proving their pact with the Devil, the court records testify to heartbreaking scenes.[6]

Everyone who underwent ordeal by water was considered to have floated, and the court records duly noted this with a number of formulaic phrases, with suspects said to have floated like a goose or swan, or sometimes even a plank of wood or a sheaf of straw.[7] It seems, though, that locals became increasingly doubtful about the reliability of ordeal by water. The records of the hearings held in Marstrand by the third Commission in 1671 noted that some had conducted ordeals by water on their own

[4] Linderholm (1918, 51–2).

[5] Ankarloo (1984, 67). See, for example, the verdict of the third Commission in 1671 (*Rannsakningarna*, 255–62).

[6] See *Rannsakningarna*, 1 July 1671, 241.

[7] See, for example, *Rannsakningarna*, 28 June 1671, 235; Trolldomskommissionens domslut 1671, *Rannsakningarna*, 261; 'Hovrättens domar 1671, *Rannsakningarna*, 309

initiative.[8] Several men told the court they had thrown one another into the water, hog-tied. A number of them had done the same to their wives at their request, while several women had also tried it on one another. They said that in every case the person sank to the bottom; indeed, for some it had been such a dangerous experience they had been bedridden for days afterwards. All the witnesses were recorded by name and spoke from their own experience on oath.[9] It is startling to find them testifying to the court about having tried ordeal by water on themselves, but given how many people had felt the urge to experiment, it would have been impossible to keep it secret from the court. We will never know what really happened, but while it is evidence of a widespread doubt about the validity of ordeal by water, for the same reason it was proof the procedure worked, because everyone was said to have sunk. It might perhaps have confirmed people's suspicions that the executioner engineered things, but any doubts on that count could be refuted if relatives conducted the ordeals in his stead.

Brutal Treatment

It is plain from the hearings that ordeal by water severely impaired the ability of the accused to defend themselves against the accusations. They had to undergo the ordeal in public and that usually involved being handled by the executioner: the kind of shame that would have been difficult to recover from. The court records often emphasise the public nature of the ordeals, with the accused tested in full view of the community. There were times when courts tried to elicit a quick confession by threatening defendants with the disgrace of ordeal by water.[10] Since all who were tested were said to have floated, they were labelled as being in league with the Devil. Ordeal by water could thus deprive defendants of all agency. There were several examples when a court succeeded in obtaining a confession of sorts in the cross-examination that followed immediately on the ordeal. Often the accused began by denouncing others and then was coerced into

[8] Linderholm (1918, 81–3); RA, Kommissorialrätt 28 June 1671, fols. 22–3; *Rannsakningarna*, 234–6.

[9] *Rannsakningarna*, 234–5; RA, Kommissorialrätt 28 June 1671, fols. 22–3.

[10] Kerstin, daughter of Sven Snickare i Kungälv, was told to confess to 'avoid the mockery and shame brought down on the others' by ordeal by water (VaLA, GHA 2 Aug. 1669, fol. 29). For other examples of the degradation used as a threat, see *Rannsakningarna*, 7 and 9 July 1669, 29, 38.

admitting enough to sustain further questioning. However, far from everyone was broken by an ordeal by water, despite the shame and humiliation.

When none of these methods worked, the courts often turned to torture to obtain a confession. As we have seen, the old Danish-Norwegian legislation was still in force in Bohuslän, which with determined interpretation could be said to support the use of torture. This was compounded by the permission to torture defendants given by both the governor of Bohuslän and the Court of Appeal on a couple of occasions.[11] In most cases it seems an executioner was on hand, ready to conduct ordeals by water and to torture the accused in various ways. One of the first forms of torture to be used was sleep deprivation for one or more nights. There were some cases where the court also starved prisoners at the same time. When prisoners were handed over to the executioner, he often seems to have used a variety of thumbscrews, but other forms of torture were noted in the court records. Whenever defendants were tortured, someone from the court had to be present to ask questions, and as already seen, it was known for the local priest to join in, admonishing the defendant and ordering them to confess. There were times when courts arranged for other defendants to witness the torture, to show them what was waiting if they did not confess voluntarily.[12]

In general, torture, and at times just the threat of torture, gave the court the hoped-for confession. However, despite repeated torture, several defendants flatly refused to admit to being in league with the Devil, which meant they eluded the death penalty. If, that is, they did not die in the course of the trial, harsh treatment, torture, sleep deprivation, and starvation led to the deaths of several defendants before their trials had ended. The court records are reticent, but one document explicitly states torture was the cause of death in one case.[13] The fact that the people put on trial tended to be old, and in some cases ill, made them even more vulnerable.

[11] For the provincial governor's statement in 1669, see Linderholm (1918, 129), n. 1. Similarly, in its instructions for the Commission in 1670, the Court of Appeal approved torture (ibid., 171).

[12] See, for example, *Rannsakningarna*, 3 Nov. 1669, 85.

[13] Fredrik Bagge's letter to the Court of Appeal about the charges against his mother, see *Rannsakningarna*, 211.

The Trials

The initial phase of the witch trials, which only affected south Bohuslän, began in Marstrand in June 1669 and ended with the verdicts of the Göta Court of Appeal and the first executions in the spring of 1670. As we know, it began with Anna i Holta, who was brought before the town court in Marstrand in June 1669, accused of having put a spell on Sören Murmästare. When Anna denounced Ragnille as a witch, and she in turn informed against several other women in Marstrand and elsewhere in south Bohuslän, it set in motion a lengthy trial that took in much of the province.[14] As the defendants were interrogated, many of them denounced others, with the result that an ever-growing number of people were caught up in the trials.

The provincial governor, Harald Stake, became involved when he was told about the hearings out in Marstrand. On 9 July 1669, he wrote to the mayor and council of Marstrand from his official residence in the fortress of Bohus to assure them of his support. He promised to assist in the witch-hunt in the Bohuslän archipelago and elsewhere. And he informed them that Malin i Viken, who had been implicated by Ragnille, was now in prison.[15] In fact, that day she was brought before Kungälv Town Court, in the first of a series of hearings in the town and its surroundings.[16]

A few days later, Stake ordered the commanders of the two largest islands on the west coast, Orust and Tjörn, to arrest and convict all those in his jurisdiction who had been named during the cross-examinations in Marstrand.[17] The arrests that followed encouraged the governor to recommend a thorough investigation in the whole area a few weeks later, which resulted in a series of hearings in Mollösund, a village on Orust.[18]

By this point, King Charles XI's regents had caught wind of the witchcraft cases in Bohuslän, and in a letter sent on 7 August, the governor was ordered to immediately appoint a commission to investigate the presence of witchcraft and its origin by all appropriate means. Initially, the

[14] Examined by the third Commission in 1671, one of the accused, Cidsela Peder Ruths, said Ragnille had been plied with alcohol and was drunk when she had denounced everyone. According to the record, Cidsela said, 'they had got Glanan [Ragnille] drunk at the town hall when she declared it' (*Rannsakningarna*, 232; RA, Kommissorialrätt 26 June 1671, fol. 19).

[15] Linderholm (1918, 110); *Rannsakningarna*, 52.

[16] *Rannsakningarna*, 52–95.; VaLA, GHA 9 June–6 Nov. 1669.

[17] Linderholm (1918, 110).

[18] Linderholm (1918, 110); *Rannsakningarna*, 96.

government expressed its concern at the recent turn of events, believing it important to act quickly in order to avoid having to resort to far 'harsher and more horrible means' to root it out. At this early stage, imprisonment and severe punishments should be avoided as far as possible, but hearings should still proceed with 'assiduity and seriousness' so the king's subjects would note the authorities' concern for their spiritual and temporal well-being. If it transpired that harsh punishments were necessary, the deputy lawman was to hold hearings, but he was also to submit the verdicts to the scrutiny of the Göta Court of Appeal in Jönköping.[19]

The First Two Witchcraft Commissions

Stake was quick to comply with the government's orders, and less than a month later, the first Commission began work. It held hearings in Kungälv and Marstrand and on Tjörn over a few days at the end of September 1669.[20] In his report, Stake said the witchcraft they had found was the work of the Devil and that several of those accused had admitted they had apostatised and had gone on to be baptised in the name of the Devil and added to his register of names. Stake continued that all cases of witchcraft had been referred to the ordinary courts. As Linderholm pointed out, the Commission seems to have taken its duties lightly, as it left it to the lower courts to pursue the cases it had identified.[21]

The hearings in Marstrand, in Kungälv, and on Orust in 1669 ultimately resulted in ten death sentences, which were referred to the Court of Appeal in November that year.[22] With one exception, all of the verdicts were upheld. Linderholm drew attention to the fact that the Court of Appeal handed down its judgements surprisingly quickly, and without casting any doubt on the veracity of statements made in the lower courts.

At the same time, the Court of Appeal asked the regency government for additional hearings in order to obtain further information from those already convicted. This met with approval, and in February 1670, the Court of Appeal was commissioned to appoint a new witchcraft commission.[23] This began work in Kungälv at the end of April 1670. The Court

[19] Linderholm (1918, 120–1); *Rannsakningarna*, 17–18.
[20] Linderholm (1918, 120–4).
[21] Linderholm (1918, 124).
[22] The town courts in Marstrand and Kungälv had each handed down three death sentences and the district court in Orust four.
[23] Linderholm (1918, 169–70).

of Appeal's instructions for the second Commission included permission to use all means possible, including torture, to obtain information.[24] To the great disappointment of the Commission, no new information or confessions were forthcoming; instead, the majority now wanted to withdraw their earlier confessions, and in several cases, people accused of witchcraft had to be acquitted. The Commission then went ahead with some of the executions, expecting that the remainder, faced with imminent death, would make fresh confessions. This method did not work either. In a letter to the Court of Appeal on 28 April 1670, the head of the second Commission complained that they had very little to show for their efforts.[25] Three of the nine whose death sentences were confirmed by the Court of Appeal had died in prison, probably as a result of the harsh conditions and repeated torture, so this phase of the witch-hunt ended with six people being executed in Kungälv.

At this stage the trials were concentrated in the small towns of Marstrand and Kungälv and the fishing village of Mollösund, while the countryside was unaffected to any appreciable extent.[26] From Sörlin's study of the Göta Court of Appeal, it seems prosecutions for witchcraft and superstition were more common in towns than in rural communities in seventeenth century, and to that extent, the Bohuslän trials thus followed the more general pattern.[27] Kungälv and Marstrand, like Mollösund, may have been small as towns went, but they still had a greater population density than the countryside. Exact numbers are hard to assess, but it seems both Kungälv and Marstrand had populations of about 500 at the time of the witch trials, while Mollösund was unlikely to have been more than 200. For both Marstrand and Mollösund, herring fishing was central. Both had seen something of a boom in the mid-sixteenth century when the fisheries took off, but as fish stocks fell towards the end of that century, the scaling back of local economies saw populations plummet. By 1660, however, there were signs the herring had returned to the Bohuslän coast, and Marstrand and Mollösund flourished for the next couple of decades.

[24] Linderholm (1918, 171).

[25] Linderholm (1918, 180).

[26] An exception was the Elin i Staxäng hearing, which was held in Stångenäs in 1669 and 1670.

[27] Sörlin (1993, 127).

However, none of the towns or villages had populations to match those of a century earlier.[28]

Interlude

The executions in the spring of 1670 were followed by a lull. There were no further large trials until the early summer of 1671. However, fear of witchcraft continued to spread through Bohuslän, and two hearings quite separate from the earlier trials were now held with suspects from Stångenäs and Uddevalla, while Vette district court in north Bohuslän heard a case that included accusations of witchcraft which would prove a harbinger of the trials to come in that part of the province.

The district court in Stångenäs had brought the case against Elin i Staxäng in the summer of 1669 after she had been accused by a local official of having put a curse on him. At the hearing, a woman from the area added allegations of *maleficium*, and the locals present confirmed that Elin had long been a notorious witch. The court decided that she should undergo ordeal by water, but even then they failed to get her to confess.[29] The hearing was resumed in October that year and again in January 1670, but despite brutal questioning and torture, they still could not extract a confession that was sufficient to convict her.[30]

The case was thus heard during the first phase of the trials, but without reaching a conclusion. This did not escape the notice of the deputy lawman, Feman, who reminded the Court of Appeal of the case and then received permission to resume questioning of Elin and her husband Iver in November 1670.[31]

Although Elin had tried her hardest to protect her husband, the court's renewed cross-examinations and use of torture ultimately extracted the

[28] For Mollösund, see Thornblad (1971, 23–7). Holmberg (1963, 239) has a table of residents of Bohuslän towns from 1671 to 1692. Marstrand had a registered population of 410 in 1671 and 392 in 1672; Kungälv, 203 and 175, respectively. Marstrand was thus larger than Kungälv, remembering, though, that only taxpayers were counted and not all inhabitants.

[29] Linderholm (1918, 118–19).

[30] Linderholm (1918, 159–64). Elin was resilience itself. From the court records it seems she was undaunted when the executioner tied her hands behind her back and hoisted her tied up to the ceiling. She was even able to joke about her situation, as it was recorded that she 'at length asked the executioner to let her down as she wanted to give him a kiss' (RA, Kommission i Bohuslän 31 Jan. 1670, fol. 27; *Rannsakningarna*, 161).

[31] Linderholm (1918, 183).

confessions necessary to find him guilty of witchcraft too. The couple were sentenced to death, and the verdict was upheld by the Court of Appeal in February 1671.[32]

The second hearing held in the period centred on Karin Joens i Uddevalla, a widow accused of witchcraft by several women.[33] It began in July 1670, when Karin took Maret Håkansdotter to the town court for swearing at her and fighting. However, the case soon took an unexpected turn when Maret accused Karin of witchcraft and later was backed up by two other women.[34] The original conflict was forgotten as the hearing switched focus to Karin's alleged witchcraft and pact with the Devil. The case was adjourned, and by the time it resumed in January 1671, Feman the deputy lawman was involved. Despite torture, such confessions as there were were not enough for the court to convict, so the case was resumed later by the third Commission.[35]

At about that time, there were the first accusations of witchcraft in north Bohuslän. In July 1670, the district court in Vette gathered to hear the accusations made by Olof Tronson against his stepmother Maret and her maid Gunill. Olof said his stepmother had put a curse on him eight years before, which had made him ill and 'as if maddened'.[36] Then Gunill had put a spell on his wife because she wished both her and Olof ill. Maret and Gunill admitted that harsh words had probably passed between them, but they emphatically denied doing any harm. The court, with the chief district judge Gustav Farther presiding, persuaded Olof to withdraw his accusations and apologise to his parents, saying he had acted out of 'misapprehension and a weak head'.[37] This was not the final word, however, as the case was resumed with fatal consequences the following year.

[32] Linderholm (1918, 187).

[33] For the details of the case with extensive quotations from the court records, see Kristiansson (1951, 217–43); see also Linderholm (1918, 182–3, 188–92).

[34] One of the women accused Karin of having destroyed her malt and thus her chances of brewing. The other said that on one occasion she heard Karin curse both the soil and the crops (Kristiansson 1951, 223–4).

[35] Linderholm (1918, 188–92).

[36] RA, Kommissorialrätt 4 July 1670, fol. 35; Linderholm (1918, 181–2).

[37] Linderholm (1918, 181–2).

Culmination

The final phase of the witch trials in Bohuslän began in the early summer of 1671 when the Court of Appeal decided that a third Commission should be set up to hear and rule on the cases that were still undecided. According to Linderholm, they were probably driven to take action by the numerous letters received from the lower courts. Perhaps the Court of Appeal thought that the local authorities in Marstrand had not been diligent in their investigations. No one could think the third Commission lacked zeal, however: it held lengthy hearings and questioned a large number of suspects, some of whom had been reported as early as 1669. The Commission was led by a chief district judge, Christoffer Gyllengrip, and included several others, such as Gustav Farther and Petter Drachman, as well as Feman the deputy lawman.[38]

The hearings began on 16 June 1671 in Kungälv, where suspects had been brought from all over the province. As in other courts, both ordeal by water and torture were used to force confessions from the accused. After a few busy days, the Commission moved on to Marstrand, where it continued its work on 26 June. When the cross-examinations were over, the Commission returned to Kungälv, where the hearing was resumed on 6 July. It concluded two days later when the Commission gave its verdicts: ten people were sentenced to death, a handful of cases were referred to the Court of Appeal, a couple of cases ended in acquittal, and some were left undecided and so to God's judgement.[39]

The witch-hunt now began with a vengeance in the north of Bohuslän. It is likely that news of the numerous witch trials and the burnings in the south fuelled the fears even in remote areas of the province.[40] In Feman, the deputy lawman Bohuslän had a fanatical judge who was happy to criss-cross the province to eradicate witchcraft wherever it reared its head. A few months after the third Commission had finished business in Kungälv, Feman went to Kvistrum, where he presided over the Provincial Court as it began proceedings against Kerstin i Lövri on 6 September.[41] She had spent the summer in prison because a farmer, Lars Olofsson, had accused her of casting a spell on his wife, who fell ill and died.

[38] Linderholm (1918, 198–232).
[39] Linderholm (1918, 230–2); *Rannsakningarna*, 255.
[40] Linderholm (1918, 233–57).
[41] Linderholm (1918, 234–40); *Rannsakningarna*, 264–73.

After an ordeal by water and hard questioning, the court finally persuaded Kerstin to admit she had a pact with the Devil and also to inform against a number of other women who joined in the same meetings with Satan. However, her cross-examination had to be interrupted after a week, because Feman was needed at the district court in Hede (now Tanumshede) to open a new hearing with the district judge Gustav Farther and lay judges from the hundreds of Tanum and Vette.

The case in question was Olof Tronson. He had returned to court to make the same allegations against his stepmother Marit and her maid Gunill. Despite having withdrawn his accusations and made an apology in the district court in 1670, in July 1671 he approached the provincial governor Harald Stake to bring charges. In his letter, Olof wrote of returning from military service in Poland only to clash with his stepmother about the farm he was to have shared with his parents, whereupon, according to Olof, his stepmother had wished him ill and had given him poisoned food which almost killed him. The conflict had continued to the point that his father had taken the farm from him and given it to his sister. When Stake had received the letter, he ordered the bailiff in Vette to imprison the two women pending a hearing.[42]

This was the trial Feman was now to preside over. It was not long before the court heard of women in the area who had been working as healers, and they were duly brought in for questioning. The result, after more denunciations were extracted by force, was that a total of eight women were questioned by the court, subjected to ordeal by water, and tortured at length, all in the hope of stereotypical confessions about a satanic pact. After several days of hearings, the court sentenced four of the women to death, while the other four were taken to Kvistrum, where the previous trial was waiting to be concluded.

First, the court resumed the cross-examination of the women who Kerstin i Lövri had denounced.[43] Two of them confessed under torture to being in a pact with the Devil, along with all the standard tropes the judges and the rest of the court wanted to hear. They were sentenced to death, as was Kerstin. Despite being tortured repeatedly, the other two women refused to confess to witchcraft, and their cases were thus referred to the Court of Appeal. The court then completed the cross-examination of the women brought from Tanum, who were subject to the same cruel

[42] *Rannsakningarna*, 280–1.
[43] Linderholm (1918, 251–7); *Rannsakningarna*, 18–19 Sept. 1671, 273–9.

treatment as the others. All four were forced to admit they were in a pact with Satan, and for that they were sentenced to death. On 19 September, the hearings in north Bohuslän ended, by which time a total of eleven women had been sentenced to death.

The Göta Court of Appeal

In November 1671, the Court of Appeal handed down the final verdicts for the hearings in the south and north of Bohuslän earlier that year. In the light of the statements and conclusions of the third Commission, the Court of Appeal decided to sentence ten people to death.[44]

It was the same people who now had their death sentences confirmed, with one exception: Karin Joens from Uddevalla, who the Court of Appeal did not want to sentence to death because, despite extremes of torture, she never admitted to a pact with the Devil. During cross-examination, however, she had confessed to a past sin, adultery, which led the Court of Appeal to decide she should be flogged at the town pillory.[45] Three other women, whose verdicts had been referred by the Commission to the Court of Appeal, were given suspended death sentences: if none of them confessed when they were taken to be executed they would be set free, but one of them would then be exiled.[46] Eight of the women who had been questioned and left to God's mercy by the Commission were now acquitted of all charges by the Court of Appeal.

A few days after sentencing, the Court of Appeal considered the cases it had received from north Bohuslän. On 15 and 18 November, it confirmed all eleven death sentences. The two women who despite everything had never confessed to being in a pact with the Devil were given suspended death sentences and were to be visited by priests in the run up to the day of execution in order to persuade them to confess. Since they continued to deny everything they escaped the stake, but the other eleven from north Bohuslän were executed in January 1672. Those from south Bohuslän were executed at the same time, while the three women who were put through mock executions did not waver in their denials and so were not

[44] Linderholm (1918, 262–8); *Rannsakningarna*, 301–17.

[45] According to the material Linderholm used Karin Joens died during the punishment, so he gives the number of executions as twenty-nine. As Kristiansson (1951, 242–3) noted, however, according to other records she survived.

[46] Linderholm (1918, 262–3). There were four women whom the Commission referred to the Court of Appeal for judgement, of whom Ingeborg Slaktares died in prison.

executed. One of the prisoners had probably died in the interim, for there were nine people beheaded and burnt at the stake in the south of Bohuslän.[47]

In total, the trials in 1671 led to the execution of twenty-two people, including Elin and Iver in Staxäng. It marked the end of the witch trials. However, two women remained, having been denounced near the end of the hearing in north Bohuslän, whom there had not been time to question. When they appeared before the district court in January 1672, they flatly refused to confess, and unlike the previous trials, the court was satisfied with this and did not move on to ordeal by water or torture. The Court of Appeal showed similar lenience when it heard their cases in November 1672, for it sentenced the women to do public penance in church and ordered their parish priests to admonish them to refrain from incantations and other superstitions.[48]

The last phase of the Bohuslän witch trials had been far bloodier than the first, when only six people had been executed. At all stages, however, people accused of witchcraft died in prison from mistreatment, and thus according to Linderholm, some forty people lost their lives as a result of the trials. The total number of executions was twenty-nine, according to Linderholm—a figure which has circulated in the literature ever since. However, Linderholm assumed that Karin Joens died from the flogging, whereas later research has proved that in reality she survived. Thus, twenty-eight were executed.[49]

The estimate that some forty people died in conjunction with the witch trials is nevertheless correct. The difference between the first and second wave of trials in the number of executions might be explained by the fact that the proceedings in north Bohuslän were limited to the second phase. This was compounded by the zeal of the third Commission, which requestioned people who had been investigated in the first phase and in several cases sentenced them to death. The areas where the witch trials ended in the greatest number of death sentences were Vette Hundred in north Bohuslän, Marstrand, and Mollösund. It was largely women who were executed, an issue I will return to in the next chapter. There was also a

[47] Helga i Halltorp was not executed until March 1672 (Linderholm 1918, 270).

[48] Linderholm (1918, 269–70). Those sentenced to do public penance (*kyrkoplikt*) did so in their parish church by standing in a special spot for services to atone for their sins, after which they were received back into the congregation.

[49] Kristiansson (1951, 242–3).

tendency, as Linderholm noted, for those who had connections among the local elite to have a better chance of eluding the death penalty. This was evident in Marstrand, for example, where in a couple of cases the court seems to have treated female suspects differently depending on their status in the town.

It was largely the authorities, or rather the courts, that conducted the hearings and ensured a continuous supply of new suspects by forcing defendants to denounce others. The Bohuslän witch trials were top-down affairs; more so than contemporary trials elsewhere in Sweden, where popular demands for trials and punishment could be an important factor.[50]

Admittedly, the belief that witches existed and they were in league with the Devil was fundamental to the authorities' actions everywhere, but it was especially evident in the Bohuslän hearings. State, Church, and the local authorities were all involved to varying degrees. Harald Stake, as the Bohuslän's governor, played a key role once the witch-hunt was underway, if only because so many of the hearings were set in motion on his orders.[51]

Initially, central government in the shape of the king's regents also played a crucial part by ordering Stake to appoint a commission immediately to investigate the prevalence of witchcraft and stop it from spreading further. The government again intervened when in February 1670 it approved the Court of Appeal's request to appoint a second Commission. At the same time, the government also decreed that no one should be burnt alive, as tradition dictated: those sentenced to death should be beheaded first.[52]

Linderholm's survey of the trials indicates that thereafter the government took no further part in events, perhaps because it was increasingly preoccupied with the trials that were gathering speed and scope in other regions. The church leadership does not seem to have shown much interest in the Bohuslän trials. Although the bishop of Gothenburg, Zacharias Klingenstierna, was a member of the first Commission, neither the bishop nor the cathedral chapter took the lead during proceedings, according to Linderholm.[53]

[50] For popular demand as a factor in the trials in Dalarna, see Ankarloo (1984, 310–13). Sörlin (1993, 9) argues that the courts' influence over events in Bohuslän was more evident than it was elsewhere in the country.

[51] Linderholm (1918, 75).

[52] Linderholm (1918, 169–70).

[53] Linderholm (1918, 76–7).

Witchcraft cases were thus largely confined to the local courts, where the local clergy often took an active part. The third Commission, which sat in the summer of 1671, and the Göta Court of Appeal also played a central role in the outcome of the trials. The Commission was ruthlessly thorough in its efforts to eradicate witchcraft. Feman, who sat on the Commission and presided over many of the local hearings, was a prominent figure throughout and was instrumental in the fatal outcome of so many of the trials.[54]

Last but not least, there was the appellate court. As already noted, higher courts generally had a moderating effect when it came to witch trials. However, the Göta Court of Appeal had no such influence on the Bohuslän trials until the very end. The verdicts handed down by lower courts were simply accepted without question, with little time for reflection and no sign of stricter evidentiary requirements. Whenever defendants refused to confess to being in league with the Devil, the Court of Appeal did revoke the death penalty, but only after a retrial, with further questioning and questionable methods such as mock executions. The Court of Appeal also gave the trials fresh momentum by pushing for both the second and third Commissions.

Yet, ultimately, the Court of Appeal's actions seem to have helped bring the trials to an end in 1672: in convicting the last defendants, it took a far more lenient approach. As Linderholm noted, it seems probable that by this stage the members of the court, like the Svea Court of Appeal and central government, had become all too aware of the consequences of taking a hard line.[55]

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[54] Similarly, Linderholm (1918, 271) argued that Feman was largely responsible for the disastrous outcome of the trials.

[55] Linderholm (1918, 269–70).

Holmberg, Åke, 'Bohusläns historia: perioden 1550–1880', in Erik Lönnroth (ed.), *Bohusläns historia, utarbetad på uppdrag av Göteborgs och Bohus läns landsting under redaktion av Erik Lönnroth* (Stockholm 1963, Almqvist & Wiksell).
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CHAPTER 3

Accused and Accusations

In order to study who was accused of witchcraft, what they were accused of, and how the accusations were made, I have compiled the information about the sixty-three people who Linderholm concluded were tried as witches during the Bohuslän witch-hunt. In this chapter, I analyse the suspects' backgrounds and the charges brought against them and compare the confessions obtained from them in court with the accusations made by local communities.

The Accused

I have numbered all sixty-three defendants in the order in which they stood trial (see Appendix) and indicated them in the map (Fig. 3.1). Of them, only seven or possibly eight were accused by someone from their local community (highlighted in the map).[1] In addition, two women (highlighted in grey) were brought before the court once it was revealed

[1] The seven known to have been denounced as witches by their neighbours were Anna i Holta (1 of 63 to stand trial), Elin i Staxäng (22), Karin Joens (26), Per Matsson (28), Kerstin i Lövri (49), Marit Anundsdotter (58), and Gunill Toresdotterr (59). Malin på Härön (18) may also have been one of them, but she may also have been denounced by Ragnille i Marstrand.

G. Malmstedt, *Premodern Beliefs and Witch Trials in a Swedish Province, 1669–1672*, Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-76120-2_3

that locals had turned to them as healers, in the judges' eyes a sure sign of witchcraft, even though the witnesses had not presented it as such.[2]

All the others had been denounced by imprisoned suspects, pressured by the court into naming other witches. These accusations are shown in Fig. 3.1 as lines connecting defendants. In total, about fifty of those accused of witchcraft were tried only because of statements made by existing suspects, forced out of them by brutal interrogations and torture. It goes to show how rapidly the trials became self-sustaining and the extent to which they were driven by the courts.

Once in prison, a small number of those put on trial following forced accusations also faced accusations from their local communities (the case for eight people), while during the hearings it emerged that a further fourteen defendants were widely reputed to be witches. Thus, some thirty people, or almost half of those tried because of forced accusations, already had a reputation for witchcraft.[3] This suggests that the accusations were not entirely random and at least in part were guided by the belief that certain people really were witches.

Of those who were tried, fifty-seven were women (circled in Fig. 3.1) and only six were men (marked with squares). This was a common pattern in witch trials across Europe, where often the majority of those tried and convicted were women. The proportion of men was similarly low in the trials in the far north of Sweden, but was higher in, for example, Älvdalen and Mora in central Sweden, where just over 20 per cent of the accused were men.[4] Accusations were made by both men and women, but plainly the women who were forced to denounce their accomplices with a few exceptions only named other women (see Fig. 3.1).

There were several possible reasons for this. The subordinate position of women certainly made it more difficult to accuse men. It is also possible the courts expected women to be accused, and this affected the course of the questioning. However, evidently, the judges were not categorical on the question of gender. This can be seen in the fact that the courts were suspicious of married women's spouses and set out to establish whether they were aware of their wives' witchcraft or even involved in it. In one

[2] Börta vid Vagnarberget (60) and Marit i Yttene (61).

[3] The situation for 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 19, 20, 29, 31, 32, 33, 34, 37, 40, 43, 54, 55, 56, 57, 60, and 61. All but two—Per Larsson i Mollösund (20) and Gunnar i Winnestorp (43)—were women.

[4] In Mora in the province of Dalarna, for example, 25 per cent of the accused in 1669 were men, but only 10–15 per cent were men in the Norrland trials (Ankarloo 1984, 270).

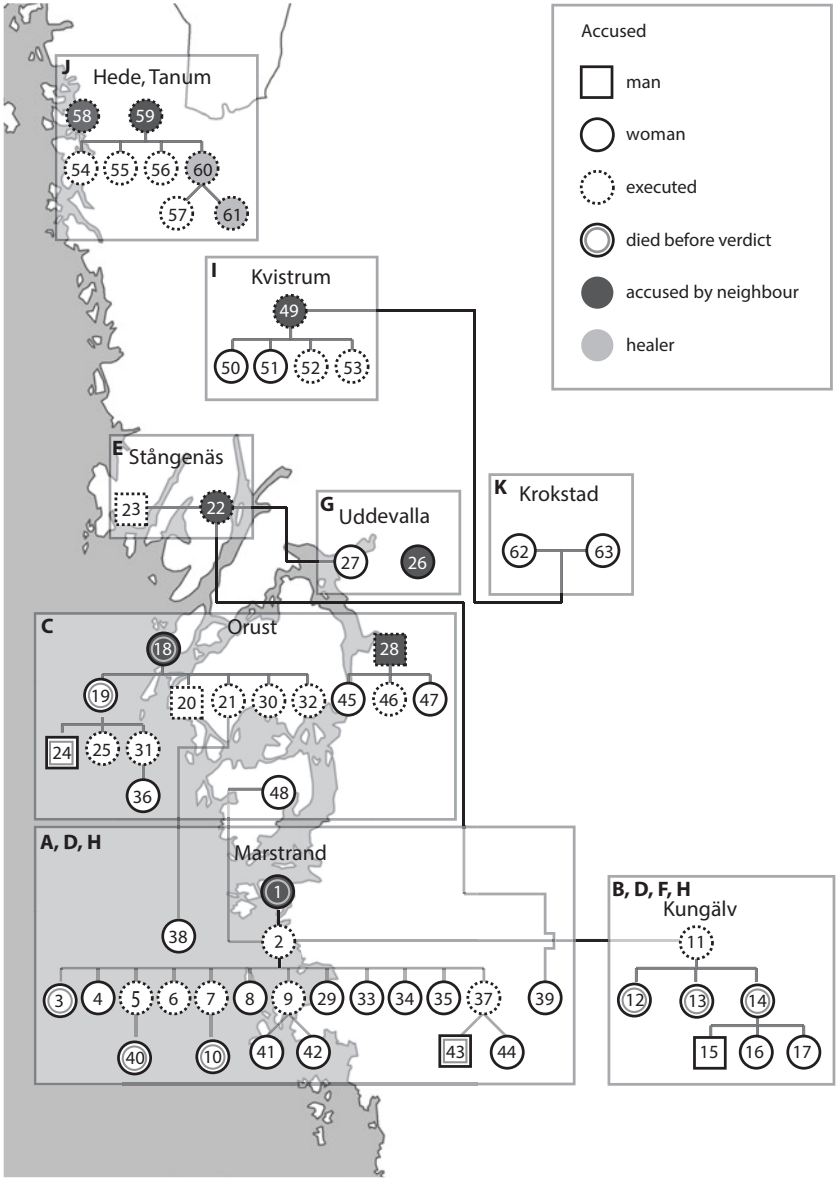

Fig. 3.1 Witch trials in Bohuslän, 1669–1672. For a chronological list of defendants, see Appendix, for the sequence of trials see Fig. 3.2. Map by *Fugazi Form*

A	Marstrand Town Court hearings (8 June to 7 August 1669).
B	Kungälv Town Court hearings (9 July to 6 November 1669).
C	District court hearings on Orust in Mollösund (19–21 August 1669) and Trätte (25–29 October 1669).
D	First Commission hearings in Kungälv (20–21 September 1669), Tjörn (22 September 1669), and Marstrand (25 September 1669).
E	District court hearings in Stångenäs (27 August 1669), Kvistrum (11–12 October 1669), Herrestad (29–31 January 1670), Ytterby (25–29 November 1670).
F	Second Commission hearings in Kungälv (21–27 April 1670).
G	Uddevalla Town Court hearings (6 July 1670 & 3 January to 7 February 1671).
H	Third Commission hearings in Kungälv and Marstrand (16 June to 8 July 1671).
I	District court hearings in Kvistrum (6–9 & 18–19 September 1671).
J	District court hearings in Hede aka Tanumshede (14–16 September 1671).
K	District court in extraordinary session in Krokstad (22 January 1672).

Fig. 3.2 The sequence of witch trials in Bohuslän, 1669–1672

case, by aggressive questioning and torture, the court succeeded in persuading one of the women to denounce her husband.

It is possible the high proportion of women suspects also reflected contemporary patterns of social interaction: when a woman was pressured into singling out others, she probably knew more about other women's reputations and behaviour than men's.[5] Equally, it cannot be excluded

[5] In his study of German witch trials, Durrant (2007, 77–8, 84) suggests that in his field of study, accusations were often strongly gendered, because that was the reality of everyday life and the division of labour: men and women were expected to live in different spheres. When those accused of witchcraft were forced to denounce other witches, they picked people from their immediate circle, who were generally the same gender. For Sweden's rural areas in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Hagelin (2010, 132–35, 151–55) has shown it is

that more women were known as witches. Some historians have argued that more women than men may have been more inclined to try everyday magic and healing, and therefore were at greater risk of being accused of *maleficium*.[6]

In terms of age, the Bohuslän trials seem to have involved middle-aged and older people. In his report to the government about the first Commission, the provincial governor Harald Stake said most of the accused were 'old and aged people of 50, 60, and 70 years of age'.[7] There was probably an element of exaggeration in this, but it still seems likely a large proportion were old. Only on rare occasions do the court records give an exact age, but nevertheless, only a few of the suspects could be described as young, and the rest were at least middle-aged if not older.

The court records also tend to be vague about their social status, but they seem to have been drawn from a comparatively wide range of backgrounds, with some comfortably well off and others poor at best. In a couple of cases, women's names testify to their husband's line of business, with professions such as butcher and carpenter mentioned. In six cases, defendants were explicitly said to be widows and in one case a widower. Single people may have been overrepresented but they were not in the majority, and in several cases, it is known there was a spouse in the background, as when the courts tried to establish whether husbands had known of their wives' witchcraft.

According to Linderholm, women with connections to the local elite tended to be more likely to avoid the death penalty. This seems to have been the case in Marstrand, where the court's handling of women suspects may have depended on their social status. Feman felt the authorities in Marstrand were being too wary and complained about their inaction to the Göta Court of Appeal.[8]

Stake said in his report that the parents and ancestors of the suspects 'ordinarily had been burnt as witches, and had wide reputations for witchcraft'.[9] This was a clear exaggeration, but it cannot be denied that kinship was an important factor. The court records show that at least three

reasonable to talk of special women's worlds, meaning social spheres where women gathered to work together or to socialise.

[6] See, for example, Sharpe (2004, 449).

[7] *Rannsakningarna*, 19.

[8] Linderholm (1918, 195–6).

[9] *Rannsakningarna*, 19; RA, Kommission i Bohuslän, fol. 2.

defendants had a mother or aunt who had been executed for witchcraft.[10] It was compromising to be related to a known witch—something confirmed on several occasions during the trials. It was also known for close relatives to be accused at the same time. There were four cases where mother and daughter were denounced together, one case of a mother and son, and one case of a father and daughter, while a couple of defendants were cousins and there were instances of healers who were mother and daughter.[11] According to Bengt Ankarloo, kinship had a key role in trials across Sweden, thanks to the belief that witchcraft was a form of knowledge, a skill acquired over many years of training, which required a long-term association with an expert.[12] According to this belief, it was common for mothers to train their daughters.[13]

Acquitted

Several defendants were never convicted. The confession necessary for a conviction was never forthcoming. The result during the first wave of witch trials in Bohuslän was that the courts were forced to leave a number of cases open. In some, the accusations were weak, but in others, the defendants had been widely reputed to be witches and had been subjected to ordeal by water in the course of the hearings. When the third Commission convened in 1671, it chose to revisit several of these open cases. Some of the accused bravely continued to deny everything, despite being tortured, which although they remained suspects saved their lives. The court, meanwhile, concluded that a small number of women had been accused on false grounds and should be acquitted.[14]

In arguing they might be innocent, the court stressed that in all seven cases the women had previously had good reputations; until they were

[10] Malin i Viken's and Karin Sköttes' mothers had been executed for witchcraft, as had Börta Sunnerborg's aunt (*Rannsakningarna*, 91).

[11] Mothers and daughters Ingeborg Slakters and Malin Slakters, Margareta Sven Snickars and Kerstin Svenses, Gertrud Simon Madtses and Cidsela Tolle Svendsens, and Marit i Yttene and Gertrud i Kitteröd; mother and son, Malin på Härön and Per Matsson; father and daughter, Per Larsson and Anna Persdotter. Elin i Staxäng and Karin Joens were cousins. True vid Vagnarberget's daughter, the healer Börta vid Vagnarberget, was accused of witchcraft and executed.

[12] Ankarloo (1984, 275–7).

[13] Ankarloo (1984, 275).

[14] The verdicts of the witchcraft commissions are printed in *Rannsakningarna*, 255–64.

accused none of them had been known for witchcraft, and they were considered by the court to be honest women. This was decisive in determining their fate. It was also significant that none of them had been accused by their neighbours. All were accused by people already suspected of witchcraft. In several cases, the accusations were later withdrawn. The court added that the majority of these women had not been allowed to face their accusers, which undermined the credibility of the accusations.

The court also rejected two accusations on the grounds that they were false and motivated by jealousy and malice. The first was Catharina Bengts, who was accused by Iver i Staxäng. She said it was in revenge for a past disagreement over the sale of some pigs, which had left Iver angry and bitter. The court accepted her explanation and at the same time emphasised that Catharina had not been allowed to confront Iver and, crucially, had not previously been of 'any ill repute'.[15]

The second case was Margareta Tormod Nilsson. She had been denounced by Kerstin Svensdotter, who believed Margareta's husband Tormod was to blame for her, Kerstin's, arrest. Tormod, as an alderman and member of the court, had also pressed Kerstin during her cross-examination. Kerstin admitted she had denounced other women to avoid being tortured by the town executioner, and that she blamed Tormod for her plight. Kerstin also said, 'if I go to my death, Tormod's wife will go with me.'[16] Presented with this, and given Margareta had 'an honest name' or good reputation, the court decided to acquit.

One of the other women the third Commission acquitted, Cidsela Simonsdotter, had protested her innocence with sincere tears, which witches were not supposed to be able to do. The court stated in its verdict that she had 'bewailed her misfortune with copious tears', noting that throughout the hearings it had not 'seen any witch shed a tear, whether under torture or otherwise'.[17] It helped that Cidsela had a good reputation and the woman who denounced her had later withdrawn her accusation.

Malin Nils Fredrikssons was another of the women the court did not want to convict. She was the widow of Marstrand's former mayor, and one of her sons was a town priest. He lent her his full support and defended her in letters to the court, in which he suggested that one of his father's

[15] *Rannsakningarna*, 263; RA, Kommissorialrätt fol. 67.
[16] *Rannsakningarna*, 239–40; RA, Kommissorialrätt, 1 July 1671, fol. 29.
[17] *Rannsakningarna*, 263; RA, Kommissorialrätt fol. 68.

enemies had a hand in the accusations against Malin. The court found that two of the three people who in 1669 claimed that Malin had consorted with the Devil had later withdrawn their accusations, while the third, Kerstin Svensdotter, was generally considered an unreliable witness. As Malin had not previously had a bad reputation, the court decided not to sentence her and instead to defer to the Göta Court of Appeal's judgement.[18]

Ingrid Jon Håkanssons from Uddevalla had only been accused by Elin i Staxäng, who before her execution had retracted several accusations. Since Elin's testimony was shaky and Ingrid's reputation was untarnished, Ingrid was told she could acquit herself by swearing her innocence supported 'by 12 honest women'.[19] She duly took the oath in Uddevalla town court in August 1671 and so was acquitted of the charges.[20]

The court records reveal that some of the women the court wanted to acquit were indeed members of the local elite. Ingrid's husband was a respected merchant in Uddevalla; Malin was the widow of the mayor of Marstrand; Margareta's husband was an alderman. Several of the seven acquitted women were of strong local standing, which is likely to have ensured they were well treated. Crucially, by the court's own account, none was known to be a witch and all of them had honest reputations. This was compounded by relatively weak accusations, forced from existing suspects, several of whom later retracted. Whether it was the shakiness of the evidence or the strength of the women's social position which was decisive—and probably it was a combination of the two—none of these women had to undergo ordeal by water. However, given Feman's complaints to the Göta Court of Appeal when he thought the Marstrand authorities were too passive in their treatment of some of the suspects, including Malin Nils Fredriks, the most committed judges would not be stopped by suspects' social status; had any of these women been rumoured to be witches, had their neighbours made more specific accusations of witchcraft, their fate would probably have been very different.

[18] *Rannsakningarna*, 262.
[19] *Rannsakningarna*, 263.
[20] Kristiansson (1951, 234–6).

The Göta Court of Appeal followed the Commission's line.[21] All the defendants who were still considered suspects but who had not been persuaded to confess were to be subjected to a mock execution. If they still did not confess on the verge of execution, then one of them would be exiled and the others would be released. The seven women the Commission had thought innocent were now formally acquitted by the Court of Appeal on the basis of the same argument and 'restored to their former honour'.[22]

The Accusations

The courts' view of witchcraft and the witches differed from the suspects' neighbours and other locals. That much is plain when the confessions the courts obtained by force are compared with local accusations.

Forced Confessions

Although the courts regarded *maleficium* and other forms of pure witchcraft as major sins, a pact with the Devil was still the gravest crime and the focus of all the investigations. There were several standard components in the diabolical pact, and the courts looked for each to varying extents when cross-examining witnesses and defendants. In many cases, they managed to get them to confess to eating a meal in the presence of the Devil, which was considered the first step in a pact. It was usually a simple meal of, say, cheese and aquavit, served by an existing witch, who used it to draw the recruit into the Devil's circle.[23] Often, defendants were then persuaded to confess they had been baptised by the Devil and had signed his book of names with their blood. Some were coerced into saying that the Devil had bitten them, which resulted in scars that were shown in court.[24] Other

[21] For the Göta Court of Appeal's verdicts, see *Rannsakningarna*, 301–17; for south Bohuslän, see RA, Kommissorialrätt 10–11 Nov. 1671, fol. 1–18; for north Bohuslän, see RA, Kommissorialrätt 15 Nov. and 18 Nov. 1671, fols. 21–28.

[22] *Rannsakningarna*, 309–11.

[23] For example, Ragnille spoke of eating three Thursday evening meals with Anna i Holta, which was the beginning of her contact with the Devil (*Rannsakningarna*, 8 July 1669, 30; see also *Rannsakningarna*, 22 Sept. 1669, 63).

[24] In some cases defendants said the Devil took the shape of a dog and left his mark on them by biting them (*Rannsakningarna*, 3 July 1671, 244; *Rannsakningarna*, 15 Sept. 1671, 291).

expected features of a diabolical pact were the familiars which the Devil gave to his followers and female witches having sex with the Devil.[25]

The courts normally tried to establish early on in proceedings who had first taught the suspect witchcraft and brought them into contact with the Devil. In their hunt for accomplices, the judges pounced on stories of local witches meeting the Devil. This was generally said to have been at entertainments, variously described as feasts or making merry, all framed in terms of country festivities with plenty of food and drink. A couple of defendants said there was music, with fiddlers and drummers adding to the party atmosphere.[26] Yet while there was no sign of the lurid details known from other witch trials accounts, defendants still retailed the common stereotypes, saying that the witches' sabbats had taken place at Easter and especially on Maundy Thursday, that participants flew there on animals or devils, and that the Devil had been present in person, the centre of attention.

Local Accusations

Accusations made by locals rarely implied there was a diabolical element to the witchcraft, and, strikingly, pacts with the Devil were never mentioned. The court records survive for seven of the eight cases based on accusations by neighbours or other locals. In each one, *undsägelser* (maledictions) were mentioned in the original allegations. The underlying reality was usually a person who was thought a witch had wished someone ill, which was believed to be a threat of impending disaster.

Maleficium or deliberate harm was another frequent accusation: in six of the cases it was said the witches had done evil, usually having first threatened or cursed their victim. It took the form of sickness and even the death of people or animals. In three cases, it was also alleged the witch had put a curse on household activities such as baking or distilling. There were also accusations of weather-making magic, of shape-shifting into cats, and of precognition or future sight, and occasionally of causing fires or

[25] See, for example, Elin i Staxäng's confessions above and on a woman on 15 Sept. 1671 (*Rannsakningarna*, 292) who confessed she had fornicated with one of the Devil's familiars and then gave birth to 'a little puppy' (RA, Kommissorialrätt fol. 227).

[26] There was said to be music at the witches' sabbat at Stenkyrka on Tjörn (*Rannsakningarna*, 21 Aug. 1669, 106–9).

shipwrecks, stealing people's luck, secreting magical objects on their victim's land, and in one case putting a curse on their soil and crops.

Although pacts with the Devil were never explicitly mentioned, a couple of local accusers hinted at diabolical connections. One witness said she had seen a black dog near the sack of cursed flour she bought from the suspect. The black dog was probably understood to be the Devil in animal form, or perhaps one of his underlings. Another witness, a local official, said one of the defendants had found out by supernatural means that she would be arrested and implied the information had come from the Devil.

There were also local accusations made against people who were denounced by suspects during the hearings, as we have seen. *Maleficium* accounted for most of them, but there were also allegations of love magic, milk-stealing, hidden magical charms, ruined marriages, and shape-shifting. A diabolical connection was also hinted at when one witness said he saw one of the suspects flying through the air one morning at Easter, the implication being that she had been at a meeting with other witches and the Devil might have been present.

Different Conceptions of Witchcraft

A comparison of the confessions the courts obtained by force with the accusations made by locals confirms the difference in views on witchcraft and those thought to be witches. In their efforts to force defendants to confess, the officials and priests who made up the courts, give ample evidence of having internalised the idea of witchcraft known from the great witch-hunts elsewhere in Europe. They went looking for diabolical witches who had conspired with like-minded people and the Devil to destroy Christianity. This notion of witchcraft and witches, which had been evolving in scholarly and theological circles since the late Middle Ages, had certain standard elements. Most important was the witch's pact with the Devil and the associated rituals such as the meal, the book of names, and the Devil's mark. Gatherings where the Devil and his followers in an area came together to indulge in various excesses were another almost obligatory element.

There was little to be seen of these notions among local accusers, who were primarily concerned with traditional magic and *maleficium*, the harm done. What the accusations do show is that there was a widespread belief that some people were skilled in the black arts and used their ability for everything from destroying people and animals to stealing people's luck and disrupting key household activities. There is no evidence they thought

witches were in the service of the Devil or had made a pact with him, although there are occasional glimpses of a connection with the Devil. Neither do witches and wizards seem to have been in the habit of acting collectively, which after all was one of the main features of scholars' stereotype. Judging by the local accusations, the witches in Bohuslän were solitary figures who honed their evil skills on their own. There were a couple of stories which deviated from this pattern, but although they featured witches who attacked as a group, they were told by people already in prison and on trial, not by neighbours.

There were some ideas about witchcraft which were common to both the courts and popular opinion. There was general agreement that witches had the ability to inflict damage by magical means, or *maleficium*. Kinship and inheritance were thought important both as circumstantial evidence in court and as fuelling neighbours' suspicions. And it seems in both the scholarly and the popular view, witches were thought able to fly.

In sum, the evidence of the local accusations is that the notion of witchcraft which informed the courts' actions in this period did not find favour among the population of Bohuslän. In the course of the witch trials, however, the scholarly and traditional notions of witchcraft and witches were matted together, as the courts gradually constructed the stories on which to base their verdicts. In the next chapter, I will turn my attention to these narratives.

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CHAPTER 4

Lost at Sea

In the summer of 1669 a fishing boat from Mollösund was lost at sea in the Skagerrak, and with it the owner Thomas Andersson and his crew of seven. When the first witchcraft hearings were held in Mollösund in August that year, a strange story was soon circulating which blamed a group of witches for the sinking.

The first hearings were presided over by Petter Drachman, the chief district judge for the islands of Orust and Tjörn, assisted by Anders Larsson, who was one of the islands' commanders, two county sheriffs and the local lay judges.[1] Proceedings began with the cross-examination of an octogenarian widow, Börta Crämars, who soon not only admitted her own guilt but also denounced five accomplices—three women and two men. The court harassed these new suspects into confessing, and they added new details to the existing story.

It is not clear whether things had been investigated further by the time the first Commission met on Tjörn on 22 September 1669, but in any case information was forthcoming that further compromised one of the existing defendants.[2] When the local court continued the hearing in Trätte on Orust in October, the lost fishing boat was the focus of hard questioning. The hearing was now presided over by the zealous deputy lawman for

[1] Linderholm 1918, 113.
[2] Linderholm 1918, 122–4; *Rannsakningarna*, 22 Sept. 1669, 116–17.

G. Malmstedt, *Premodern Beliefs and Witch Trials in a Swedish Province, 1669–1672*, Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-76120-2_4

Bohuslän, Nils Thomesen Feman, and along with the chief district judge and the county sheriff, there were now also a district judge and twelve lay judges from Orust and Tjörn on the bench.[3] The hearing ended with the defendants found guilty of sinking the boat, and they were sentenced to death, with that given as grounds for the verdict. The Göta Court of Appeal upheld the death sentences in November and the executions took place in April 1670.[4]

The story of the boat is interesting in several respects, and for that reason warrants a detailed account of how it took shape over the course of the hearing, partly to detail how witchcraft accusations could evolve as the hearings progressed, and how the alleged crimes were pinned on the defendants, but also because it points up several important elements in the premodern worldview, which will form the basis of my argument in subsequent chapters. The interaction of popular belief and scholarly tradition embodied by the story is another reason to pay it close attention.

Börta's Confessions

Börta Crämars, the first to be questioned when court proceedings opened in Mollösund on 19 August 1669, had been denounced by the notorious witch Malin på Härön, who was interrogated and underwent ordeal by water a couple of weeks earlier.[5] Malin had died in prison shortly afterwards, but she still had time to confess and name some she said were just as guilty of witchcraft as she was, among them Börta and an old fisherman in Mollösund called Per Larsson.[6]

The court record gives the impression that Börta willingly confessed early during her cross-examination, without the court having to threaten her with torture. The first question was how old she was when Satan first came to her, to which she answered she was twelve or fourteen years old. Börta at first refused to serve him, but after a while, he had persuaded her to follow him. Where this was, she did not want to say, however.

Having confessed to being in league with the Devil, Börta was asked if she had a hand in destroying Thomas Andersson's fishing boat and how

[3] Linderholm 1918, 139–40.

[4] Linderholm 1918, 158–9, 168, 175–6.

[5] For the records of these hearings, see *Rannsakningarna*, 98–110; VaLA, GHA 19–21 Aug. 1669.

[6] *Rannsakningarna*, 19 Aug. 1669, 98–9.

many accomplices. Judging by the question, it must have been rumoured in Mollösund that the boat had foundered because of witchcraft. According to the court record, Börta answered almost immediately and without further coercion that five or six people had acted together. She had sat in the aft and Malin på Härön brought down the mast while Per Larsson took the helm and steered. Gertrud Corporals from Mollösund was there, up on the yardarm, and Per Larsson's daughter Anna too. Börta did not want to give the name of the sixth witch, and the court left it and went on to ask her about these other charges. The following day, the cross-examination resumed and Börta was reminded of her previous confession, which she did not deny. She now added that Per Matsson from Mollösund had also been involved in the sinking.[7]

Börta was apparently a notorious witch and from the first had to answer to accusations of various sorts of *maleficium*. She was accused of being the reason why a Mollösund woman, Rolands Barbro, died after being bedridden for four years. At first Börta strongly denied it, but after a while she caved in and said that she 'had a little falling out' with the woman before she fell ill, and it seems curses had been exchanged. The court asked Börta about the grudge she held against Truls i Mellby, who had fallen badly and broken his leg; it was assumed she was the cause of it, in other words. She answered that Truls had struck her and cursed her for taking kindling and firewood from a house he was building. Her reaction had been to tell him to go to the Devil. She too seemed to ascribe the accident to her curse and clearly felt Truls deserved it.[8] In a later cross-examination, it transpired she did not really believe it was her fault the woman fell ill or the man injured himself, because both had attacked first and she was only defending herself.

Finally, Börta was asked if she had 'taken away from her own son Håkan his secret thing', as was rumoured in the area. She denied it. The court summoned the son, who said he had indeed lost his manhood, the same year that his father had died; however, he did not know if his mother was guilty or if someone else was to blame. When Börta heard her son's words, she had a change of heart and admitted that she had crept into his room when he was asleep and smeared ointment 'across his belly'. She had not removed any part of him, but she had 'let him lie and wither away; it will grow back again'. By way of explanation, she said she wanted him 'to stay

[7] *Rannsakningarna*, 20 Aug. 1669, 101.
[8] *Rannsakningarna*, 19 Aug. 1669, 100.

quietly at home with me, not run around the village after women'.[9] This magical castration was given a more prosaic explanation a few months later when the son was questioned by the Commission: it turned out that the reason for his impotence was a venereal disease.[10]

One of Börta's supposed accomplices in the shipwreck was a widow in her sixties called Gertrud Corporals. When she heard during her first cross-examination that Börta had accused her, she said Börta was 'mad and insane and knows not what she says'. She said no one should believe what Börta said. The court paid no heed to Gertrud's protestations, but there are reasons to question Börta's reliability. In his study of the witch trials, Emanuel Linderholm is inclined to agree with Gertrud.[11] True, Börta's behaviour in court might well support that view, but it should be noted that Börta's stories tallied well with the worldview expressed by others during the witch trials: in every case it revolved around some form of traditional *maleficium*, the recurring motif in the witchcraft cases. In one respect, however, Börta's story about the wrecked boat was different—it was about a group of witches who worked together to attack people. There was no other example from the entire witch-hunt of a joint attack launched by several witches. This is worth noting.[12] Otherwise, there was nothing that unusual about her stories, and the court appears to have put some store by her words. What might call Börta's dependability into question is her seeming readiness to confess to being in league with the Devil. Apparently, she confessed without the court having to threaten her or resort to coercion. Other defendants only said they had consorted with the Devil if pressed, after aggressive questioning, ordeal by water, or other forms of torture. Most were probably aware that to confess was to sign their own death warrant, but this does not seem to have given Börta pause. She gave no examples of how a pact with the Devil was to her benefit, as was normal. She did not even associate her witchcraft with the Devil: she did not have him to thank for her skill. What she could do she had learnt from others. This notion of witchcraft was not alien to the popular tradition. Where Börta was very different was that her encounter with the

[9] VaLA, GHA 21 Aug. 1669, fol. 260; *Rannsakningarna*, 106–7.

[10] *Rannsakningarna*, 22 Sept. 1669, 117.

[11] Linderholm 1918, 114.

[12] Another group attack was mentioned during the trials; however, it was unclear how many people were meant to have been involved, and the general tenor was different, as it was a story Ragnille told about Malin Ruths and some other witches, who she said had dropped copper horse figures into the sea to ruin the fishing (see Ch. 8).

Devil and her decision to follow him seemed to have been of such small consequence to her.

Embroidering on a Story

After Börta's first cross-examination, the court turned to Per Larsson, who in addition to being denounced by Malin på Härön had now also been accused of complicity in the sinking of Andersson's fishing boat.[13] Per was described as an old man, over sixty years old, who lived in Mollösund. The cross-examination began with the vicar of Morlanda, Lars Jönsson Dahl, asking Per if he could read his catechism. Per proved that he could by reading out several prayers. The court then ordered him to confess, as he stood accused of witchcraft by both Malin and Börta. Per replied that he knew in himself that he had never done harm and that anyone who tried to impute that he had was guilty of telling shameful lies. He did not know how to do witchcraft, and Malin, who had first denounced him, was now burning in hell for her lies. The court warned him that if he did not confess he would undergo ordeal by water.

Evidently, Per was well known for witchcraft. When he continued to deny Malin's and Börta's accusations, the court asked him what Anna Skaboe's daughter had done for him to swear she would never marry. Per said he had spoken in jest, but the woman in question was brought before the court and said several years previously an enraged Per had threatened she would never get married. Since she was still unmarried, she and those around her took it to mean the curse had worked. The general conclusion was that Per had ruined her chances of marrying, an allegation known from other witch trials.[14] The bailiff then sent to Per's neighbours to see if they were prepared to take an oath with Per to swear him free. They declined in view of the position he now found himself in, by which they presumably meant the charges against him. Some told the court that Per had always been impertinent and defiant towards the authorities and others. What the court record described as a credible old man said that when Per Larsson swore someone would come to harm, it always came about.[15]

The court decided that Per would undergo ordeal by water, and they moved on to Gertrud Corporals, who had been denounced by both Börta

[13] *Rannsakningarna*, 20 Aug. 1669, 101–5; VaLA, GHA 20 Aug. 1669, fols. 249–50.
[14] Östling 2002, 81.
[15] *Rannsakningarna*, 20 Aug. 1669, 103.

and Malin på Härön.[16] She too denied all the charges of witchcraft and said no one could claim she had done any ill to anyone in all the years she had lived in Mollösund. Sure enough, no one came forward during the trial—an indication she was not known as a witch, unlike Per and most of the other defendants. She said Malin på Härön had lied about her because they had always been enemies, and no one should attach any importance to what Börta said because she was mad. The court was unmoved by her statements and warned her they would be forced to resort to other means if she did not confess voluntarily. Gertrud maintained her innocence, but said she knew she was at the mercy of the court and reminded them they would be held accountable for their actions before God. The court's response was to promise she would be treated well, as long as she confessed. Under unrelenting pressure, she said she once dreamt she had flown to the top of a high mountain. She apparently believed the dream to be a supernatural experience of some kind and had been worried by it. It is not clear from the court record what the members of the court thought, but judging by what happened next they thought it compromising.

At this point, the priest, Lars from Morlanda, took over. He began by testing Gertrud's Christian faith. He then asked if she remembered telling him in prison that Malin på Härön had broken the mast on the boat that sank. Gertrud replied that no, she had not said, whereupon the priest exclaimed, according to the court record, 'What say you? … Do you deny what you have confessed to me, and call me a liar?' Gertrud, yielding, said she might have said it, but she did not remember it. The court upbraided her and demanded she confess in full. Gertrud's reply was, 'I dreamt that Malin på Härön broke a piece of wood over her knee, and perhaps it was the mast of Thomas's boat.'[17] It seems likely this was what she had told the priest in prison; if so, it was he who took her dream to be the memory of an actual event. Of course, there was always the possibility that Gertrud's reason for telling the priest was that she feared it really was her remembering rather than dreaming. Either way, the court was now convinced Gertrud had witnessed Malin attacking the fishing boat. She continued vainly to declare her innocence, saying she had never practised witchcraft. She was handed over to the public executioner to throw her into the sea to see if God would send a sign. The court record states that she was

[16] *Rannsakningarna*, 20 Aug. 1669, 103–5; VaLA, GHA 20 Aug. 1669, fol. 253.

[17] VaLA, GHA 20 Aug. 1669, fol. 255. Svenungsson garbles what Gertrud said to Malin (*Rannsakningarna*, 105), but Linderholm 1918, 116 has a correct transcription.

tested four times, 'and each time floated more readily on the water than the others, in the sight of many people in Mollösund'.[18]

Ordeal by water had a dramatic effect on Gertrud's ability to defend herself. When she returned to court the next day, it was clear the degrading experience had broken her will to resist. The court began by asking who had taught her witchcraft, to which Gertrud replied that it was Per Larsson's wife Kirstin. When first asked if she wanted to learn 'illicitness', Gertrud had turned her down, but gradually she allowed herself to be persuaded by Kirstin's kindness. She said Kirstin had a farmhand in the shape of a black dog, who served them both and often brought them food, beer, and wine.[19]

As Gertrud went on, her stories became distinctly odd. She said the witches had assembled with the Devil in Stenkyrka on Tjörn: men and women, but no maids, meaning no young, unmarried women. She had flown there on the farmhand; Per Larsson rode on 'the Evil One', meaning the Devil, and Malin på Härön arrived on a billy goat. Asked how many people there were, she said, 'they were like a great army.' She went on that she had been at a banquet held in the earthworks round Carlsten, Marstrand's new fortress, when the Devil had married a young girl from the town. By her account, it was a magnificent wedding, the beer and wine flowed, and later, the guests witnessed the bedding, when the newlyweds went to bed.

Gertrud gave the court more than they could have hoped for. She took on the persona of the classic witch, flying through the air to the festivities the Devil laid on for his faithful servants. The fact that witches were legion must have alarmed many and spurred on the keen witch-hunters.

When she had finished, Per Larsson was summoned to face Gertrud. She spoke of both the Stenkyrka banquet and the Devil's wedding in Marstrand and said Per had been present on both occasions. He was incredulous and asked her if she had really confessed as much. Then he burst out, 'You must know that you are going to burn in hell for lying about me as you have done.' The court decided to hand Per over to the executioner for an ordeal by water. 'And then God put his sign on him so that he floated twice on the water.'[20]

[18] *Rannsakningarna*, 20 Aug. 1669, 105.
[19] *Rannsakningarna*, 21 Aug. 1669, 107.
[20] *Rannsakningarna*, 21 Aug. 1669, 110; VaLA, GHA 21 Aug. 1669, fol. 267.

The hearing resumed when the court met in Trätte on Orust at the end of October 1669, when the defendants were cross-examined by the deputy lawman, Nils Thomesen Feman. Gertrud went first.[21] Her earlier confessions were read out so she could confirm she stood by them. The court asked for the details of how she had learnt witchcraft and when she had succumbed to Satan. They asked leading questions about whether she had been baptised by the Devil and when she had been entered into his book of names. It is clear from the record that the court—which presumably in practice meant Feman—used questions and hints to steer Gertrud into a confession that was in line with the scholarly tradition.

The court was duly said that while she was learning from Per's wife, Kirstin, the Devil had been present in the shape of a black dog. Asked if she had eaten anything during the lesson, Gertrud said Kirstin had given her 'butter, bread, and meat' and urged her to finish it in God's name 'so she would become wise'. The court doubted that God's name had been mentioned and wondered if the meal had not been in the Devil's name. The vicar led a prayer to God that all poor, benighted people might see their way to confessing, whereupon Gertrud changed her story and admitted that the Devil had been present for the meal—the traditional view being that it confirmed she had entered into a pact with him.[22] Gertrud further confessed that she had been baptised by Satan and added to his book, and she had been given a little grey servant to serve her. The servant's name was Lucifer or Beelzebub, and he lay with her in her bed several nights. When the court asked if he had 'been with her like any man', she replied, 'Yes, sometimes two or three times a night.'[23] With this, the picture of the classic witch was complete; the court had embedded the story of the lost fishing boat in what they considered its proper diabolical context.

When Gertrud went on to protest she had not done any harm or been of service to the Devil, she was immediately rebuked by the court, which reminded her of the sinking of Andersson's boat. Was it not a sin done on the orders of the Devil? she was asked. Gertrud broke down and confessed it was indeed done in the Devil's service, and afterwards, he had sought

[21] *Rannsakningarna*, 25–29 Oct. 1669, 124–48; VaLA, GHA 25 Oct. 1669, fol. 203.
[22] *Rannsakningarna*, 126–7.
[23] *Rannsakningarna*, 25 Oct. 1669, 127; VaLA, GHA 25 Oct. 1669, fol. 207.

her out down at the water's edge in Mollösund and asked if the boat was dealt with. When she told him, he wrote it in his book.[24]

Next day, once the court had questioned Gertrud about her store of magic ointment that gave witches the ability to fly, they returned to the story of the sinking so Gertrud could now embroider the story with more detail.[25] She explained that the witches had gathered on the skerry next to Thomas Andersson's boathouse, and from there flew after the boat in the shape of birds: Malin på Härön as a raven, Per Larsson a crow, Börta Crämars a magpie, Gertrud a jackdaw, and Per Matsson a wagtail.[26] In other words, they all chose to become corvids except for Per (a wagtail being altogether less frightening and presumably not as magical either), while Anna Persdotter's bird shape was not known, as Gertrud said she could not remember. When they reached the boat, they all resumed human form and set about sinking it. Per took the helm; Malin broke the mast. A storm had blown in, conjured up by Malin, who Gertrud said was skilled in such things. As the boat sank, she could hear the drowning men crying out to God for help. The job done, they flew back to land as the same birds as before.

At this point, the lay judges on the bench interjected that Per Matsson had not been in Mollösund when the boat sank, having gone out with another fishing boat.[27] Their objection seems not to have shaken the court's belief in the story as a whole, although Gertrud was warned not to lie about Per Matsson or any other person. For her part she was rattled by the lay judges' correction and said she thought she had seen Per on the boat, although after a while she felt more certain and announced she would swear on her life it was the truth. However, the court lost interest in Per Matsson's part in this case after the lay judges' remarks, and he was not questioned further about the shipwreck. He was charged and found guilty of other crimes of witchcraft, however.[28]

After she had told the court about using the Devil's ointment in order to fly to the sabbats, Gertrud's cross-examination ended and the court summoned Börta Crämars. When asked about Andersson's boat, she confirmed Gertrud's story about having shape-shifted into birds. She could

[24] *Rannsakningarna*, 128.
[25] *Rannsakningarna*, 128–30.
[26] *Rannsakningarna*, 129; VaLA, GHA 26 Oct. 1669, fol. 210.
[27] *Rannsakningarna*, 26 Oct. 1669, 129.
[28] Per Matsson was sentenced to death by the third Commission in 1671 (*Rannsakningarna*, 255).

not remember what guise Anna Persdotter and Per Matsson had taken, though. Börta was so far gone by this stage that the court was forced to pause. During the break, she was visited by the priest and other members of the court, and it is possible it was then she heard the new details about the shape-shifting.[29]

The court turned to Per Larsson, who continued to assert his innocence. Gertrud was brought back in and made to repeat the stories that had Per alongside her. According to the court record, she was completely frank and told Per he should deny nothing. Nevertheless, he denied it all, lamenting the shameful lies Gertrud and the others had told about him and warning them that they, like the judges, would have to face him and God's stern judgement. The court repeated the charges against him and made a point of Per's notoriety for witchcraft, which the bailiff and lay judges who were present could corroborate. He replied with considerable bravado that 'they have no reason to speak to him, come what may he will not confess, even though they were to chop his limbs off'.[30]He had only floated during the ordeal by water because of the way the executioner had tied him up. He continued to insist on his innocence, to the point that the court record noted that he 'detained the court half the day with such exculpations, and gave voice to many disagreeable words'.[31]

Rounding Off the Story

Armed with a witness willing to confess everything and give the story greater credibility by adding details, it remained for the court to persuade the other defendants to admit their part in the boat's sinking. The old fisherman Per Larsson and his daughter Anna were the next to be cross-examined. The court tried various tactics. They used Gertrud as their cat's paw, making her confront Per and Anna on several occasions in order to repeat her story and urge them to admit their guilt, but also questioning her in camera so they could double-check confessions as they were made. Cross-examinations in open court were interspersed with individual conversations, when the vicar took defendants aside and tried to elicit a confession. Plainly, the priest had an important role to play in proceedings.

[29] *Rannsakningarna*, 26 Oct. 1669, 130–1.
[30] VaLA, GHA 26 Oct. 1669, fol. 216; *Rannsakningarna*, 132–3.
[31] *Rannsakningarna*, 132–3.

What was decisive in this phase, however, was torture. In the end, both Per and his daughter were tortured.

When Per Larsson's cross-examination was resumed on 27 October, it seems ordeal by water had not had the same demoralising effect as it had on Gertrud and many others. Per continued to deny all charges, despite the best efforts of the court and the vicar to convince him otherwise. At one point, after the vicar had spent an hour in a fruitless attempt to get him to confess, Per was said he would be handed to the public executioner to be tortured, to which he replied 'annoyingly' that they could do what they wanted, he would still not confess. The vicar and several lay judges were present when he was tortured to exhort him to confess and ensure the executioner did not overstep the mark.[32]

The torture had its intended effect. Per confessed to the vicar and asked to return to court to admit his misdeeds. He spoke of learning witchcraft from an innkeeper in Halden, but he could not remember her name. He admitted he had been a guest at Satan's wedding in Marstrand and that he had helped sink the fishing boat. However, he utterly denied that his daughter or Per Matsson had been on the boat. His only company had been Malin, Börta, and Gertrud. After repeated questioning, Per also admitted that when he met the woman in Halden, he had been baptised in Satan's name and had signed the book of names in his own blood. It also emerged that a black cat had been present throughout, and Per had later ridden it to the Devil's wedding in Marstrand.

Per had now given the court all the key elements in a pact with the Devil. His fate was sealed. However, the court wanted more details about both the wedding and the shipwreck. According to the court record, it was during this questioning Per sometimes smiled as he answered. Asked if he had given the bride a wedding present, 'he smiled and said he did not give her anything'.[33] Like Gertrud, he said a priest had conducted the wedding and a drummer had played during the wedding banquet. When the court asked if the drummer had been paid, Per 'smiled' and 'said he did not see anyone give him money, but to the priest they gave an offering'.[34] When Gertrud was summoned to corroborate Per's account of the wedding, she reminded him that the drummer had indeed been paid

[32] *Rannsakningarna*, 27 Oct. 1669, 136.
[33] VaLA, GHA 27 Oct. 1669, fol. 220; *Rannsakningarna*, 135.
[34] VaLA, GHA 27 Oct. 1669, fol. 221; *Rannsakningarna*, 136 differs slightly.

and 'then Per said she spoke truly and smiled at her'.[35] In contemporary idiom, the verb *le* could mean either laughing or smiling; it seems probable that Per smiled, for if he had laughed it would have called for further comment in the court record. His smiling gives an impression of a sardonic or even contemptuous attitude towards the court and its thirst for details to add to the story.

In the end, however, they managed to push Per into implying that his daughter had been on the fishing boat. Gertrud only had said this was the case when questioned in camera. Then she was made to face Per, who heard from her current confession that his daughter had flown out to the boat in the shape of a magpie. Per at first said he had not seen her, and whatever else she had not flown there with the others. Then he gave in and said she probably arrived at the boat after the others. In the same breath, he begged the court not to judge her harshly, as she had not been involved at any other point and so God would certainly be able to forgive her. He also stressed that she had several small children and therefore should be treated mercifully.

The court was now ready to force a confession from Anna. Brought before the court, she was said both Gertrud and her father had admitted she helped sink the fishing boat. She protested her innocence and said those who accused or convicted her of this would have to answer before God, and God himself would come down 'to answer for her and fashion stones which would attest to her innocence'.[36] Gertrud, however, maintained that everything she had said was true. According to the court record, Per said nothing until Anna finished 'with great noise and clamour about her innocence and her many small children', whereupon he said he did not rightly know. As it was now evening, the court adjourned for the day, having ordered the jailer to make sure Anna got neither food nor sleep during the night.[37]

Next morning, Anna was brought before the court and again heard what Gertrud and her father had said about her. Despite being kept awake all night, hungry, she flatly denied everything. The court decided Anna should be moved to a separate building, having been told the public executioner was preparing to visit her. In this vulnerable state, the vicar would then try to coax a confession from her in private. After much goading, she

[35] Ibid.
[36] *Rannsakningarna*, 137; VaLA, GHA 27 Oct. 1669, fol. 223.
[37] *Rannsakningarna*, 138.

asked for time to consider what she could confess in court. The court agreed and in the meanwhile cross-examined Gertrud and Per again. Gertrud this time said they had all helped deal with the people on the boat, but they did not succeed in their plan until Anna came to the rescue, having been sent for by Malin. First, they took the skipper and threw him into the sea, with Gertrud holding his legs and Anna helping, and then the rest were thrown overboard, and they 'called on God and begged for help when they were in the sea and the boat went under'.[38] Per was asked if Gertrud's story was true. He said he had no knowledge of it, as he was busy with other things and did not have time to watch what was happening. Gertrud was apparently caught up in the story, because she now began to weep and ask for God's mercy, and ran on about her pain at having brought about the deaths of so many good men, and now five women were widows and eleven children were fatherless.

After Gertrud's dramatic performance, Per began to distance himself from his earlier confessions. He said, 'he regretted everything in his lifetime he had done against God.' He did not seem to count the sinking of the fishing boat among his sins, however, as he now announced he 'was not much to blame for the fishermen's deaths'. He felt sorry for the men who had been killed, and explained that he had been good friends with all of them. Per now refused to admit to doing anyone else harm or to serving the Devil. When his earlier confessions were read back to him, Per said he might have said it, but 'he did not mean anything by it; neither would it do much harm'. The vicar warned him to refrain from saying such things and to repent his sins. Per disagreed and 'said he could indeed defend what he had done, when he prays to God, he is forgiven'. He responded to every attempt by the court and the vicar 'very contemptuously'. According to the court record, this was taken as a sign Per was once more firmly in the grip of the Devil.[39]

Since the court was making no progress with Per Larsson, he was taken from the courthouse and Anna was summoned again. She denied everything, so the court produced Gertrud, who urged her to tell the truth. That too had no effect, and both women were sent out while the court discussed how to proceed. Casting about for an excuse to use torture, the court noted that Anna had been singled out as an accomplice in the sinking of the fishing boat by both Börta and Gertrud, and her own father had

[38] *Rannsakningarna*, 28 Oct. 1669, 139.
[39] VaLA, GHA 28 Oct. 1669, fol. 227; *Rannsakningarna*, 139–40.

confirmed she was there on the boat. The fact that both her father and mother had the taint of witchcraft only strengthened the court's suspicions. As a result, Anna was handed over to the public executioner to be tortured like her father. The vicar was to attend on the court's behalf to exhort her to confess.

It was not long before Anna said she was prepared to confess if she was given an hour to think. She told the court it was Gertrud who had lured her into becoming a witch, and it was Gertrud who had served her a meal, which she ate in the Devil's name. This was the point when Anna too confessed to a pact with the Devil. She also admitted being on the fishing boat, but said she had flown there in the shape of a tern, not a magpie. When Gertrud was brought in again, she first denied having taught Anna witchcraft and then repeated that Anna had helped on the boat, including throwing the crew overboard. Anna in turn insisted it was all over before she reached the boat. Eventually, Gertrud confessed to teaching Anna, although she was not complete novice, having learnt a little from her mother while she was alive. She said she knew Anna's name was in Satan's book, written in her own blood, and the familiar the Devil had given her took the shape of 'a little black puppy'. Anna admitted to this too after a while, but she protested that it was only a very small Devil she had been given, 'little bigger than a mouse'.[40] She was adamant she had never attended any other meetings and that she had done no harm before Gertrud baptised her.

The court now had enough in the way of confessions from all the defendants to be able to proceed. The next day began with short cross-examinations of Gertrud, Per, and Anna. The court wanted general information from Gertrud about how witchcraft worked. She was asked to explain how to put curses on people, cattle, milk, and fishing catches, and how witches took advantage of their neighbours: questions prompted by traditional beliefs about magic, in other words, and not the pacts with the Devil which thus far had concerned the court. Gertrud was also asked if she knew any more witches. That drew a blank, though, and her explanation of the power of witchcraft was closer to the scholars' version than the popular tradition. All she knew was that witchcraft was to 'turn away from God and submit to the power of the evil one'. Those in league with the Devil had their familiars or servants to command; witches did not possess

[40] VaLA, GHA 28 Oct. 1669, fol. 232; *Rannsakningarna*, 143.

special powers, and it was their familiars and demons who did their evil bidding.[41]

When Per Larsson was questioned one last time, he still insisted he was innocent of witchcraft. Everything he had said about himself and others was just nonsense. He had done no harm he could not answer for before God. The vicar's response was to pray that God would drive the Devil out of Per so he could be moved to confess and repent. Finally, Per affirmed his earlier confessions, but, according to the court record, 'without the slightest sign of remorse'.[42] Since prayer had not had any appreciable effect on Per's willingness to provide the court with the desired admission of guilt, it cannot be ruled out that he was threatened with more torture without it being noted in the court record. Whatever the case, as the cross-examination ended and he was taken away, Per 'insulted the vicar'. A short cross-examination with Anna followed, who affirmed her previous confessions and asked the court to show mercy for her many small children's sake.

The court sentenced Börta, Gertrud, Per, and Anna to be burnt at the stake. In each case, the stated reason was their pact with the Devil, and the court made much of them having been baptised in Satan's name and inscribed in his book. All four were also convicted of sinking the fishing boat and killing its crew. On a couple of points, the court gave additional grounds. For Börta, it was because she had put a curse on Rolands Barbro and broken Truls i Mellby's leg, while Gertrud was also convicted of fornication with the Devil. At the end of November 1669, the Göta Court of Appeal upheld the verdicts without further comment, other than the instruction that if the condemned showed remorse they should not be burnt alive, but instead should be beheaded and the bodies thrown onto the pyre. The government later decreed that this applied in all cases, regardless of whether the condemned showed remorse or not.[43]

As seen, a second Commission was appointed on the initiative of the Göta Court of Appeal in part to force new confessions from the convicted witches before they were executed in April 1670. The result was that the overwhelming majority withdrew their confessions, both before the Commission and to the priests who visited them individually in prison. Gertrud, however, stuck by the main points of her confession, though she

[41] VaLA, GHA 29 Oct. 1669, fol. 235; *Rannsakningarna*, 144–5.
[42] *Rannsakningarna*, 145.
[43] *Rannsakningarna*, 162; Linderholm 1918, 169–70.

was now vague about being on the fishing boat and attending the Devil's wedding, and said it seemed like a dream. Anna had nothing to add, and Per said everything in the court record was unjust because he had been tortured into confessing. He did not stand by a word of his confession. Börta Crämars was no longer alive; she had died in prison.[44]

The condemned were asked again at the very last as they arrived at the place of execution: Per continued to deny everything, as did his daughter, who only confessed to having lied to herself. Facing execution, Gertrud stuck by her admission of guilt, but at the same time retracted some of her denunciations. When her head was on the block, she shouted, 'Master Lars. You shall face me and God's stern judgement, you who have brought me to this.'[45]

The Story Deconstructed

This case was distinctly inquisitorial and involved several elements typical of witch trials: zealotic judges and priests prepared to use aggressive questioning, confrontation, ordeal by water, and torture to expose a conspiracy in which the Devil and his loyal followers wrought misfortune and death. Under the direction of the court, a detailed story was constructed which gradually resolved that everyone involved was in league with the Devil, and it was the Devil who had charged them with sending the fishing boat, crew and all, to the bottom. A straightforward example of diabolical witchcraft derived from a scholarly tradition stretching back to the late Middle Ages.

However, there were also elements that came from popular tradition, among them the accusations of *maleficium* made against the suspects by their communities. Above all, they were accused of putting curses on their victims and bringing an accident or illness down on them. The fate of the fishing boat may well have been a story prompted by the old belief that shipwrecks could be caused by witchcraft—it would seem rumours to that effect were behind the court's first line of questioning—and yet it is not evident that witchcraft of that kind tallied with a story in which witches scuttled a boat and threw the crew overboard.[46] *Maleficium* customarily

[44] *Rannsakningarna*, 22 Apr. 1670, 164.

[45] RA, Kommissorialrätt 25 Apr. 1670, fol. 118; *Rannsakningarna*, 171.

[46] I have found a similar group attack on a fishing boat mentioned during a witch trial in Jutland some years earlier. The boat was sunk by the witches conjuring up a storm, however (see Chap. 5)

called for magical methods or supernatural powers, not physical violence. Similarly, collective action belonged more to the scholarly tradition, which saw witchcraft as founded in conspiracy. It may explain why the court initially asked Börta how many people were involved in the sinking and why her answer gave the story its shape.

In one of the many confessions, it was said in passing that a gale was blowing when the boat sank, and Malin på Härön had conjured it up. This sort of detail chimed better with the popular belief that witches were able to summon storms.[47] That the suspects said they took the shape of birds to attack the boat was also clearly rooted in traditional notions of witchcraft, just as in other cases witches were said to shape-shift. Their transformation into birds was not really necessary for the story. The scholarly tradition included the belief that witches could fly because of an ointment they were given by the Devil, and as might be expected, the court made Gertrud admit she had owned such an ointment.

Another expression of the combination of popular and scholarly traditions was the account of the Devil's role in witchcraft given by Börta and Gertrud during cross-examination. Börta flatly denied having been taught by the Devil; witchcraft was something she had learnt in other ways. Hers was a view supported by the popular belief that witchcraft did not necessarily presuppose close bonds with the Devil. What Gertrud voiced, on the other hand, was close to the views of the Church and the secular authorities. To engage in witchcraft was to turn away from God and making a pact with the Devil, and witches, not possessing any special skills, sent their familiars or servants to do their evil deeds for them: her explanation was more in line with scholarly tradition than with popular beliefs. At the same time, it does not tally with the story of the shipwreck, for then the witches did everything on their own—they did not send their familiars.

The court record reveals how methodical the court was in obtaining the story and the confessions it needed. Once the resilience of one defendant was broken, she was used throughout to persuade the others to confess in similar fashion. It is plain the court's goal was to obtain confessions of a pact with the Devil. If nothing else, it later constituted the main grounds for the court's verdict. The court was also obviously interested in

[47] In the seventeenth-century witch trials in north Norway, women in coastal communities were frequently accused of controlling the wind, raising storms, and wrecking ships (see Hagen 2013, 389).

assembling as much concrete detail as possible, presumably to strengthen the story's credibility. In this case, the local vicar on the bench played an important role—which judging by other hearings was not self-evident. The vicar of Morlanda seems to have been particularly committed to the witch-hunt. He was in attendance for the cross-examinations and broke in on proceedings with prayers to persuade suspects to yield. He was also present when they were tortured, trying to elicit confessions. And on several occasions, he had private conversations with them, both while the trial was underway and at other times when he visited them in their prison.

Gertrud's last words testify to the priest's importance: she openly accused him of leading her on to her dreadful end. It would seem he had influenced her actions and had a hand in her confessing so often and in such detail. The bitterness of her last words shows he may have given her the impression she would meet a more merciful end. There were examples of defendants in the Bohuslän trials who anticipated that a confession would result in a more lenient sentence. When Uddevalla Town Court cross-examined Karin Joens, she was encouraged to say who had taught her witchcraft, as the court wanted to know who had 'seduced her into committing this sin', promising that were she only to confess willingly they would intercede with the higher instances for her sentence to be commuted, because 'she was seduced by evil people'.[48] Yet no one who confessed to being a witch ever received a milder sentence on the grounds of having been seduced into learning witchcraft.

We will never know what happened in the private meetings between Gertrud and the vicar. On one occasion, however, the priest's behaviour shows how he may have set about giving Gertrud the impression she could hope for leniency. It was when his prayer to God was enough to persuade her to admit she had eaten a meal in the name of the Devil. According to the court record, he prayed that 'poor, benighted' people would confess their sins in order to keep their chance of eternal bliss. The choice of words meant that the defendant could be understood as a victim, seduced by the Devil. Given that it reduced individual responsibility, it is conceivable it was designed to dangle the prospect of lenient treatment. The victim perspective may have been used more openly in individual conversations, fooling Gertrud into thinking she would escape the death penalty. It might explain the anger of her last words.

[48] *Rannsakningarna*, 5 Jan. 1671, 192.

In what follows, the reasons for the witch trials, the course of the proceedings, and the outcomes are not my concern. Neither will the courts' motives and frame of action be investigated further. Rather, it is the insights into popular thinking and traditional beliefs offered by the court records that is the focus. The story of the shipwreck featured dreams, shape-shifting, imprecations, powerful emotions, and a belief in God which the suspects expressed in certain situations. All these phenomena will be examined in greater detail in the following chapters. At the behest of the court, the Devil was given a prominent part in the story of the shipwreck. Yet as he was virtually absent from the local accusations and witness testimony, the diabolical aspects of witchcraft will now be set aside and only briefly touched on in a later chapter.

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PART II

Dimensions of Reality

CHAPTER 5

Dreams and Reality

When on trial in 1669, Gertrud Corporals referred several times to her dreams, as we have seen. Other suspects also talked during cross-examination of dreams and dreamlike experiences. It seems both they and the courts thought their stories were evidence of real events. That is the starting point for this chapter, in which I will examine premodern views on the relationship between dreams and reality.[1]

The History of Dreams

Dreams and the interpretation of dreams are mentioned in humankind's earliest writings. In the Epic of Gilgamesh and other ancient texts, dreams are depicted as an opportunity to commune with invisible powers. There also seems to have been an unchanging, widespread belief that dreams contain hidden truths about the present and the future.[2] Not that every dream was considered portentous, of course, but in most cultures, it has probably been those who in some way were set apart from the generality whose dreams were thought significant.[3]

[1] This chapter enlarges on ideas previously published in my article 'Onda drömmar: Om dröm och verklighet i bohuslänska trolldomsmål 1669–1672' (2007).

[2] Grub 1992, 141–8.

[3] Dodds 1951, 106–107.

G. Malmstedt, *Premodern Beliefs and Witch Trials in a Swedish Province, 1669–1672*, Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-76120-2_5

Cultural history and anthropology teaches us that both dreams per se and perceptions of the nature of dreams can vary between cultures.[4] It had long been current in Europe in both scholarly circles and popular culture that dreams might reflect a different reality and constitute a point of contact with invisible powers, despite alternative explanations that referred to physiological and psychological factors had been suggested by both ancient and medieval philosophers.[5] In the seventeenth century, it was still a common belief that some dreams could have supernatural connotations.[6]

An early Nordic tradition associated dreams with warnings or journeys of the soul. The Icelandic sagas have a large number of stories about dreams, where the content of the dreams was linked to both pre-Christian and Christian beliefs.[7] Dreams in the sagas were largely taken to be warnings of various kinds. Old Norse literature also testifies to the pre-Christian notions of the soul that were associated with dreams.[8] The old term for soul, *håg* (Icelandic *haugr*), took on a wider meaning to include the will, the mind, and the emotions—in short, all the innate power of the individual. In Nordic folklore, some people had the ability to release their mind from their body, whether during deep sleep or a deliberately induced trance or state of ecstasy. When the soul left the body, it could in some cases also change shape (a belief I will return to in a later chapter).[9]

Popular beliefs in the North about dreams in the period in question here have tended to go unexplored.[10] However, one aspect of premodern dreamworlds has been carefully examined: beliefs about the mare or night spirit. In Swedish folklore, powerfully oppressive dreams were associated with a female being called a *mara*. According to Catharina Raudvere's work on the mare, the experience was not an ordinary nightmare. It can be described as a 'terrifying hypnagogic hallucination' or waking dream

[4] Burke 1997, 24–7. See also, for example, Pick and Roper 2004 and Plane and Tuttle 2013.

[5] Kruger 1992, chapter 5. When in the seventeenth century Descartes presented his theory that dreams could be explained exclusively by physiological factors, he began the erosion of long-held beliefs about the supernatural significance of dreams (Schmitt 1999, 281).

[6] Besides purely symbolic interpretations, dreams were also thought to be spiritual journeys outside the body or real encounters with supernatural beings (Gaskill 1994, 135 and notes).

[7] Kelchner 1935.

[8] Lid 1958, 299–300.

[9] Ström 1961, 104–5; Wall 1989, 12–14.; Raudvere 1993, 64–71 (for a revised version of this book in English, see Raudvere 2020).

[10] For views on dreams in Nordic scholarly circles, see Lindberg 2010 and Broberg 2010.

just before falling asleep, and thus a night terror of a kind which combined the dream state and partial wakefulness. Those affected believed they had been attacked in their sleep by mares, which could manifest themselves in various forms. Whether the mare appeared as a beautiful woman or a hairy animal, she was associated with strong feelings of anxiety. When she struck, the sleeper could experience shortness of breath, an inability to speak or move, and physical sensations such as pressure on the chest. Another characteristic was that those affected never felt they had left their normal milieu.[11]

Although Raudvere's work is largely based on folklore sources and thus primarily reflects popular beliefs as they were in the nineteenth century, she also draws on much older evidence to show it was a belief with deep roots.[12]

Gertrud's Dreams

What then of Gertrud and her dreams? In her first cross-examination, when she had heard the accusations against her and had already been threatened with torture, including ordeal by water, she described a dream in which she climbed a high mountain. The court had just promised her she would be treated well if she confessed, and it seems the dream was the only thing she could come up with that in any sense corresponded to witchcraft. Her confession, such as it was, was noted down in the court record:

> She answered, I confess as I lay sleeping once I dreamt I fared up a steep green meadow, and came to the top of a high mountain, and below the high mountain lay a deep lake; when I saw the lake I was aghast, and quickly threw myself backwards onto the mountaintop lest I should fall down into the same lake; whereupon I woke up and crossed myself, whereupon it disappeared and was no more.[13]

Her story gives the impression of being an authentic dream. It contained no diabolical elements to speak of, and to a modern reader, it seems strange it was considered relevant in this context. Gertrud herself told it in the form of a confession, which suggests she did not consider it an

[11] Raudvere 1993, 15–19. See also Davies 2003.
[12] Raudvere 1993, 57–101.
[13] GHA, 20 Aug. 1669, fol. 254; *Rannsakningarna*, 104.

ordinary dream. The story also conveys a fear that it was a dream about contact with dark forces. Certainly, the court does not seem to have thought the dream irrelevant; if anything, it strengthened the suspicions against Gertrud.

There was a noticeable feeling of vertigo or dizziness in the dream. For Gertrud, it was as if she was flying to the top of a high mountain. When she reached the top, she saw below her a deep lake. It added to the feeling of height, and Gertrud, terrified, threw herself back to avoid falling. It is clear the feeling of dizziness had overwhelmed her. Vertigo and dizziness are features of similar testimonies, and it would appear they were feelings which were associated with supernatural experiences.[14] That diabolical forces might have been at work was evident at the conclusion of Gertrud's story, for as she said, she 'crossed' herself on awakening 'whereupon it disappeared'. That she used the sign of the cross as protection and, crucially, it seemed to help, indicates that she thought she had had contact with evil forces.

If she or the court knew how the witches' sabbat was commonly described in the European tradition, there was every reason for suspicion. It was common for the sabbat to be held on high mountaintops, which the women reached by flying through the air on a variety of creatures. Of the witches' sabbats mentioned in the Bohuslän hearings, however, only a few adhered to the standard pattern.

After Gertrud had told the story of her dream, Lars the vicar of Morlanda took over the cross-examination. As seen, he first tested Gertrud on her Christian faith and then claimed she had already confessed to seeing Malin på Härön attack the fishing vessel. The background to this was another dream that Gertrud had supposedly told the priest when he visited her in prison.

When the second Commission re-cross-examined everyone before the executions in the spring of 1670, Gertrud specifically mentioned her dreams. She now claimed that her testimony about the Devil's wedding in Marstrand 'was to her as if a dream'.[15] The Commission had her confessions read aloud in court, and Gertrud then repeated her previous testimony about the wedding. Confronted with the written record, it must have been impossible for Gertrud to stand by assertion that her story was somehow all a dream.

[14] See Linderholm 1918, 98.
[15] *Rannsakningarna*, 165.

The Commission ordered the priests present to question the condemned on the day of execution, both before they left prison and when they arrived at the place of execution. Two clerks were to accompany them and carefully note down the responses.[16] Gertrud was asked if one of the men who had been denounced, Per Matsson, had joined in the sinking of the fishing boat. She replied that it 'seemed as if in a dream' that everyone was on the boat, as she had already confessed, but Per Matsson had not been present. She also described attending the Devil's wedding in Marstrand as dreamlike: when asked if Malin Börgisdotter had been here, her answer was that if she had said so 'then it would have come to her in a dream'.

It is not always clear what Gertrud meant by her dreams and dreamlike states. The first dream about the mountain seems to have been an authentic experience, as Gertrud recounted it. Although it was a dream, she seems to have felt it was also a supernatural encounter with evil forces. It is also likely she was telling the truth about the dream in which Malin broke a piece of wood over her knee. That it was about Malin breaking the mast of the fishing boat was most probably the priest's interpretation. In this case, it was likely to have been a real dream, but it is possible that when Gertrud gave a dreamlike character to her testimony before the second Commission in 1670, she was trying to distance herself from her earlier confessions—judging by the court record, there had been no mention of dreams when she had told the same stories in the local court.

Marit's Dream

Marit Byskrivers was brought before Marstrand Town Court on 8 July 1669. Ragnille, one of the first to be accused of witchcraft in the Bohuslän trials, had denounced Marit as a 'nasty old hag'. According to Ragnille, Marit had used witchcraft to keep the fish away and, furthermore, in the guise of a white goat, had joined with others in meeting the Devil. Marit protested her innocence.[17]

When Ragnille continued to accuse her the following day, Marit was brought back to court and told if she were guilty of witchcraft, she must confess it. She continued to deny everything and added she had never before been known for witchcraft. It was a fateful moment because later

[16] *Rannsakningarna*, 167–8, 170–1; RA, Kommissorialrätt 25 Apr. 1670, fol. 117.
[17] *Rannsakningarna*, 32–3, 42.

the same day several witnesses came forward to say Marit at various times had been suspected of witchcraft.[18] She was accused of secreting a charm bag by the front door of one of the town's burghers a few years before and of using witchcraft in her youth to win someone's love. She was also notorious for having put a curse on a man in the town who had been ill for a long time.

When Marit denied these new accusations too, the court decided she must be subjected to ordeal by water. The next day the public executioner put her through the ordeal, and as she floated, it was considered a sign of her guilt. The court urged her to confess, but she continued to deny the allegations and said she 'could not lie to herself'.[19] She was brought before to court just over a week later, but again did not want to make a confession. Then on 27 July, she appeared yet again in court.[20] At first she claimed her innocence, but then admitted that many years before, when she was a young girl, she had given money to a woman to make Per Olsen fall in love with her. Then she described a strange dream she said she had had twenty-six years earlier. The court took it to be a confession, as is clear from the record:

> At length, Marit was made to confess that one night she was asleep, and she dreamt a doll came to her, she bit off its head and swallowed it, and as she lay in bed such a giddiness came over her that she thought she was high in the air, and afterwards she confessed that she rode on the Devil in the likeness of a brown lamb, who carried her to a green hill like Björnängen, and Ragnille Jens Svenses was already there, Malin Ruths, Karin Klockars, and Skåtte Gunelle (who died last spring). And there the Devil gave them food, butter and bread and beer, and there were also two small dolls who danced for them; she admitted nothing more, but said she rode the same Devil home again, which by her admission must have been twenty-six years ago.[21]

As in the first cross-examination with Gertrud and her dream about the mountain, Marit's dream was categorised as a confession. The court record spelt out that by Marit's own account she had been in bed one night many years before and dreamt what she was now telling the court. Even so, the

[18] *Rannsakningarna*, 35–6.
[19] *Rannsakningarna*, 39.
[20] *Rannsakningarna*, 42–3.
[21] VaLA, GHA 27 July 1669, fol. 25; *Rannsakningarna*, 43 differs slightly, cf. Linderholm 1918, 98–9.

court took it to be a story about something that had really happened. It seems the story fell into two parts. First, Marit spoke of lying in bed and biting the head off a doll. Then came the 'giddiness'—the same feeling of dizziness described in Gertrud's dream. At this point, the court record interrupted the flow with the words 'and further she confessed', which gives the impression that the second part of her story, the journey to the witches' sabbat, rather than being spontaneous was told at the prompting of the court.

When Marit reappeared in court a few days later, she was asked if she had anything else to confess. Her response was to tell them she had indeed been up at the place in question, Björnängen just outside Marstrand, on two occasions and eaten a meal there with four other named women. Yet she also said she was innocent.[22] On 2 August, Marit was questioned again. At first, she denied everything she had previously confessed, but after much urging she finally declared what she had said was true. Now, though, she blamed Skåtte Gunelle for everything. She had visited Marit's house and 'caused the giddiness' she suffered from 'the two times she rode on the brown lamb, when they were gathered at Björnängen'. Later, in the same cross-examination, she said during the visit Skåtte Gunelle had asked her if she wanted to learn witchcraft. By her own account Marit had declined, saying she was afraid it would be a sin, although Skåtte Gunelle said it was not. Marit explained this happened, 'the day before the doll came to her in the night', adding that 'the time the shaking was upon her, when she bit the head off the doll, that was when she said it to Skåtte Gunelle'. When she told Gunelle what had happened, her response was 'It will pass'. Marit then told her she was going to ask Master Björn the parish priest to hear her confession.[23]

She did so, and judging by Marit's account, the priest seems to have given her the right sort of spiritual guidance. He read the Bible to her, and she did penance and received absolution. Duly shriven, she had been free of the horror of it ever 'since it befell her'.[24]

In a later cross-examination, Marit admitted the rumour was true that she had put a curse on one of the town's burghers and he had fallen ill. On 6 August, the Marstrand Town Court sentenced her to death on two

[22] *Rannsakningarna*, 44.

[23] VaLA, GHA 2 Aug. 1669, fols. 28–9; *Rannsakningarna*, 45–6. According to Linderholm 1918, 99 the priest in question was Björn Helgesson, who died in 1646.

[24] VaLA, GHA 2 Aug. 1669, fol. 28 *Rannsakningarna*, 45.

grounds: because she had ridden on the Devil and joined in his festivities, and because she had put a curse on the town burgher.[25] The Göta Court of Appeal upheld the verdict, and, like Gertrud, Marit was reinterrogated before her execution by the special Commission in Kungälv in 1670. She was probably one of those who told the priests that their previous confessions had been dreams. Like the other condemned prisoners, Marit did not want to denounce anyone else to the Commission or the priests.[26]

There were, as we have seen, two parts to Marit's dream. The first consisted of the episode with the doll and the overwhelming dizziness that followed; the second was the journey to the witches' sabbat and what happened there. From the record, it seems the court was only interested in the second part. There were no questions about the doll, nor was the incident mentioned in the verdict, which gave as grounds Marit's being transported by the brown lamb and joining in the Devil's feast.

For Marit, however, the first episode was central. When she told the court about Skåtte Gunelle's visit, she did indeed refer to the whole dream, since the dizziness, the brown lamb, and the gathering at Björnängen were all mentioned in the court record, yet as she continued she only referred to the doll in the night, as her words quoted above show. Perhaps the first part of the dream corresponded more closely to Marit's original experience, and it was only under pressure from the court that she embroidered on her story of the sabbat. The court record's glimpse of the conversation between Marit and Skåtte Gunelle seems to support this interpretation. The latter's laconic 'It will pass' possibly referred to Marit's shaking after she dreamt she swallowed the doll's head; it seems they were only talking about that part of the dream, for there was no hint the two women had shared experiences of the witches' sabbats with the Devil.

No matter how much of Marit's later story was based on her original dream, it had plainly been a frightening experience, which led Marit to fear she had sinned and perhaps even come into contact with the Devil. The impression it made on her was also indicated by the fact years later she was able to give a consistent, detailed account.

[25] *Rannsakningarna*, 49, 51.
[26] *Rannsakningarna*, 155–6, 163–70.

Malin's and Ingrid's Dreams

During the hearing in Marstrand, Ragnille identified a number of people as witches. In addition to Marit Byskrivers, she mentioned twenty-year-old Malin Andersdotter (Malin Slakters) and her mother Ingeborg Slakters. According to Ragnille, Malin spent three months with Anna i Holta learning witchcraft.[27] Both mother and daughter, brought before the court on several occasions to respond to the allegations, protested their innocence.[28]

When Malin was in court on her own on 9 July, however, it emerged that she had said during a conversation with the priest, Master Lars, that 'if there was aught she did know, it was she was betrayed in her sleep'. A jailer witnessed that he had heard her say those exact words. He added he had also heard Malin say that if she had succumbed to a 'veling' (according to Linderholm, an enchantment) it was Anna i Holta's fault.[29] It was a dangerous thing to say, but it was not until 27 July that Malin was summoned before the court. As before, she asserted her innocence, but the court decided that since she had 'doubted herself' in front of both the priest and the court, and had said she could have been 'betrayed in her sleep', she should undergo ordeal by water.[30]

The following day, Malin and another suspect were tested. Both, as the court record put it, 'floated like geese'.[31] The case against Malin mounted up. When she appeared in court on 29 July, she was 'closely examined about her enterprises', to which she responded with the following:

> Then she confessed that when she lay sleeping one night she dreamt that Anna i Holta came to her, and as she awoke it seemed to her they were together on the skerry down beyond the great stone fortress, and there Anna asked her if she wanted to learn witchcraft. She answered no; then said Anna, 'Yes, yes, you will surely come to me another time', and with that Malin was by the same means home in her mother's bed again.[32]

[27] The first accusation was made during questioning on 7 July 1669 (*Rannsakningarna*, 29). Malin's age is mentioned in a letter about the first Commission's proceedings (Linderholm 1918, 123–4).

[28] *Rannsakningarna*, 29–34.

[29] GHA, 9 July 1669, fols. 20–21; *Rannsakningarna*, 39; for *veling*, see Linderholm 1918, 99 n. 1, 102.

[30] VaLA, GHA 27 July 1669, fol. 25; *Rannsakningarna*, 43 has 'sveken' as 'sucken', cf. Linderholm 1918, 103 'sueken'.

[31] VaLA, GHA 28 July 1669; *Rannsakningarna*, 43–4.

[32] VaLA, GHA 29 July 1669, fol. 26; *Rannsakningarna*, 44 differs slightly.

Part of the dream was a sequence where Malin thought she woke up on a skerry with Anna i Holta, but when she told Anna she did not want to learn witchcraft, she genuinely woke up at home in bed. It must have been this dream Malin was referring to when she said she feared she had been 'betrayed in her sleep'. A few days later, when her mother was away, Malin said Anna visited her at home and offered her a thread with a magic knot.[33] In this way, dream and reality became interwoven in her story.

Near the end of the hearings, Ragnille withdrew her accusations against several people, including Malin, which was probably why Malin was not mentioned in the verdict handed down by Marstrand Town Court.[34] A few weeks, however, later, she was named in the hearing in Mollösund: Gertrud Corporals said she had witnessed the Devil marrying Malin Andersdotter in Marstrand.[35] These new suspicions meant she was summoned for questioning by the second Commission, which held hearings in Kungälv in 1670. Gertrud had stood by her story about Malin's wedding in several cross-examinations and even repeated it on the day of her execution, although that last time she said it had seemed a dream.

On 26 April 1670, Malin appeared before the Commission and was urged to tell the truth. She said she was completely innocent of all Gertrud's charges. Her testimony from Marstrand Town Court was read out, including the part in which she said she might have been 'betrayed in her sleep'. Her response was it had seemed to her she had met Anna i Holta on a skerry, but that she now did not remember any of it. At the same time, she insisted she had never learnt witchcraft. The court reminded her that she had floated in the ordeal by water, coming up to the surface despite trying to stay underwater by holding onto the weed and pier piles. Malin said she did not remember.[36]

When she had left the court, the priests present were told that one of them should take Malin over to the church where he should try to persuade her to tell the truth. The attempt was fruitless. As the court thought Malin too ill and weak to be tortured, her case was referred to the Court of Appeal. In June that year, however, Lars Roman, who was not only president of Marstrand Town Court who had also sat on the second Commission, ordered Malin Andersdotter's release. The order stated that

[33] *Rannsakningarna*, 44.
[34] Linderholm 1918, 108.
[35] *Rannsakningarna*, 108.
[36] *Rannsakningarna*, 168–9.

the witches who had denounced her had retracted, nor had the Commission found any evidence to support the accusations.[37] However, Malin had not been formally acquitted. By the time the third Commission decided to put her on trial in 1671, she had fled. Roman came in for sharp criticism from the new Commission—several of its members seem to have been convinced that the Devil's wedding really had taken place.[38]

The last example of a dream mentioned in a confession is to be found in the third Commission's cross-examination of Ingrid Dinnes in Marstrand in 1671. She had been denounced by Ingrid Jutes, who had been tortured into saying that Ingrid Dinnes had twice participated in gatherings and meals with the Devil on the Bohuslän island of Brattön, having supposedly ridden there on a goat. She was brought before the Commission on 29 June to be confronted by Ingrid Jute, who repeated the accusations. Ingrid Dinnes denied everything, so the court decided she should undergo ordeal by water.[39] A few days later, her daughter asked that she be allowed to put her mother through the ordeal without the executioner's involvement, and the court agreed. When Ingrid was thrown into the water later that day, the court concluded that she was floating. The executioner took over and made several attempts with her and another woman, but according to the court record, they floated 'like seabirds or planks on the water'. Ingrid was again cross-examined by the court and urged to tell the truth. She answered,

> that as it were a dream she was in a green pasture, and two cats which fought there by day, and it was between Easer and Whitsun last, one cat was Ingeborg Kjell Arnesson's and the other was her own, asked her how often she had been in that pasture, she answered 2 or 3 times, and she thought Ingeborg's mother was with her.[40]

Here again was a suspect under pressure to confess who chose to describe a dream. Admittedly, as the court record noted, Ingrid said 'as it were a dream', but even so, it seems she thought it an authentic experience. However, her story was thin on detail and too vague about the diabolical components for the court to be able to term it a confession. They

[37] Linderholm 1918, 180; *Rannsakningarna*, 173.

[38] In the opinion of Linderholm 1918, 217–18, the third Commission far exceeded all the other witch trials in its bias and injudiciousness.

[39] *Rannsakningarna*, 236–7.

[40] RA, Kommissorialrätt, 1 July 1671, fol. 32; *Rannsakningarna*, 242.

continued a barrage of questions until she admitted a number of things, one being that she had been with Ingrid Jutes 'on the slopes' of Tjörn. The court concluded that Ingrid did not want to tell the truth, so she was handed over to the public executioner to be tortured. When she appeared in court two days later, she confessed she had learnt witchcraft ten years earlier and that she done the Devil's bidding.[41] Therefore, she was sentenced to death by the Commission. However, it appears she died before the execution took place.[42]

Attitudes Towards the Dreams

These particular witchcraft cases are an opportunity to look at individual dreams and gauge how people then perceived the relationship between dream and reality. This type of text is awkward in terms of source criticism, but nevertheless it is likely some of the stories were based on authentic dreams. This was certainly the case with Gertrud's dreams of the high mountain and of Malin på Härön breaking a tree over her knee. It is probable that at least some of Marit Byskrivers's story was the memory of a dream which had made an indelible impression. Likewise, it appears Malin Andersdotter and Ingrid Dinnes told the court what they remembered of dreams, although according to the court record Ingrid was hazy about the detail.

Both the defendants and the various courts behaved as if what was said to have happened in dreams actually had taken place. In thinking this through, there is good reason to treat those involved—the courts and the defendants—separately.

Broadly speaking, members of all the courts seem to have considered descriptions of dreams to be testimony about real events. The question is whether they accepted the confessions at face value or rather whether they believed the accused had described real events as dreams. If we assume they thought the events described had indeed taken place when the suspect was asleep and dreaming, it seems strange it was considered active witchcraft. For that to be true, suspects would have to be snatched from bed and dragged against their will into a magical context. Under such circumstances, they could have appeared victims rather than witches.

[41] *Rannsakningarna*, 242–3.

[42] For the sentence, see *Rannsakningarna*, 258; for Ingrid Dinnes' death, see Linderholm 1918, 267.

Equally, their experiences could have been interpreted as the Devil's illusions. There was a long-standing theological debate about whether the Devil's actions were *illusiones diaboli* or *reales*, illusory or real. Although the predominant belief in the seventeenth century was they were real, there were occasions when leading figures in the Swedish government discussed whether the testimony at witch trials was an illusion created by the Devil to deceive.[43] The members of the Bohuslän courts may have been unfamiliar with the debate: judging by the court records, dreams were treated as evidence of real events, and the possibility they were illusions was never mentioned.

One explanation for the courts' attitude was the belief that encounters with the Devil always took place in a dreamlike state, and this was why the accused spoke of dreams.

However, several statements by the courts indicate they may have viewed dreams as a way for the accused to broach a difficult subject and that dreams were thus treated as a form of narrative framework. This was evident in Gertrud's cross-examinations, for example. When, under pressure from the priest, she said her dream about Malin might have been about the shipwreck, it seemed to irritate the court. Gertrud was asked why she 'does not openly confess to this her witchcraft'.[44] Their choice of words shows they thought Gertrud had used the dream to obscure or sugarcoat her confession. The second Commission displayed similar attitudes when interrogating Gertrud in 1670. They disbelieved her when she said she saw the Devil's wedding as if in a dream and ordered that her previous confession, in which she said nothing about a dream, be read back in court. By so doing, they pushed her into dropping the dream element, at least temporarily. Here, as in the previous example, the court was plainly not interested in hearing about dreams.

It should be noted, however, that the court records are ambiguous. At times, it seems as if the court believed defendants were telling the truth and that events really had taken place, even when defendants said they had dreamt them.

The question is how the accused perceived their dreams. In some cases, as I indicated earlier, people may have given forced confessions a dreamlike character in order to distance themselves: a deliberately chosen narrative strategy, perhaps, which played down the conscious decisions behind

[43] Lagerlöf-Génetay 1990, 148–56.

[44] VaLA, GHA 20 Aug. 1669, fol. 255; *Rannsakningarna*, 105 partial transcription.

their actions in the hope it would minimise their responsibility and guilt. But in the testimony considered here, the women seem to have genuinely feared they had come into contact with evil forces as they slept, and what they did in their dreams had also taken place in reality.

In his history of the Bohuslän witch trials, Linderholm makes the point that certain testimony may in fact have reflected experiences the accused believed they had lived through, and we should not forget that some of them might have engaged in various magical activities and in some cases even tried to practise black magic. In the right circumstances, self-suggestion, deliberately induced trance states, and hallucinations could give people the impression they really had experienced what they were accused of.[45]

Linderholm is not specifically concerned with the part played by dreams in the hearings, but even so, he sometimes comments on the suspects' descriptions of them, on a couple of occasions taking their statements to be a shorthand for odd states of mind. However, this did not apply to Gertrud's story about the high mountain, which he assumes was based on an ordinary dream.[46] Marit Byskrivers's confession, on the other hand, he takes as evidence of some form of trance: that Gunelle with her plausible talk of the witches' sabbat and her 'suggestive, mesmerising manipulation' could have put Marit into a trance, to the point that Marit's experience of the doll and the journey to the Devil's festivities were purely evoked by the other woman and had nothing to do with dreams or sleep.[47] Similarly, Malin Andersdotter's account of how she was fetched in her sleep by Anna i Holta is explained by Linderholm as 'somnambulism'.[48] It is not clear if he thought this too was because of an induced trance. Linderholm's interpretations are interesting, but there is no denying that in the cases mentioned here the court record explicitly gave the reason as dreams. With the exception of Ingrid Dinnes, all the women said they had dreamt as they 'slept', and there was nothing to suggest their experiences were because of trance states.

The stories also had obvious points of comparison with beliefs about the mare—the women described terrifying experiences in connection with sleep and dreams, after all—and yet there were important differences that

[45] Linderholm 1918, 91–2.
[46] Linderholm 1918, 116.
[47] Linderholm 1918, 100.
[48] Linderholm 1918, 102.

suggest the overlap was ultimately not so very great. No mare-like creature appeared in the women's dreams. And whereas, as Raudvere says, the characteristic mare experience was confined to the mundane setting of the home, the stories discussed here all included some form of travel to a place outside the home.

There were also parallels to visionary tales, which refers to dream visions of journeys to different realms of the dead known from the Middle Ages and to some extent from premodern times too. Those who spoke of having such experiences often said they had visions when they were in a stupor or had fallen into a deep sleep, or sometimes in connection with being seriously ill. It was a form of unconsciousness that lasted from one night to several days. In some cases, people even had visions when they were awake.[49] In the witch trials in northern Sweden, there were elements of visionary tales, above all in the encounters with white angels on Blåkulla which several children testified to. As Jan-Inge Wall and others have shown, such testimony seems in some cases to describe popular notions of the realms of the dead such as purgatory and the vestibules of heaven and hell.[50] However, the stories relevant to the present context do not even hint at the realm of the dead, nor does it seem the women thought the dreams happened when they were in a stupor or unusually deep sleep.

There is also reason to consider whether women's experiences reflected shamanist beliefs.[51] Some historians have argued that certain aspects of the European witch trials may indicate shamanism lived on in popular culture. For Sweden, Birgitta Lagerlöf-Génetay and Kristina Tegler have shown that this was indeed the case in testimony in the hearings in Dalarna: there were shamanistic elements.[52] The dream stories discussed here, however, resist any such associations. Their dreams were not attributed to trance states or stupor, and the women said nothing about shape-shifting. Neither was there any indication of initiation rituals or spirit guides, and the

[49] Wall 1989, 11–43., 185–7.

[50] Wall 1989, 27–37; Lennersand & Oja, 2001, 183–6.; Malmstedt 2002, 154–5.

[51] Shamanism can be defined as an ecstatic practice in a cult context. The belief is that trained shamans enter a trance state in order to access the spirit world. Typically, shamans are thought to bear particular responsibility for the community by healing the sick, predicting the future, and finding lost people or things, see, for example, Raudvere 1993, 88–9.

[52] Lagerlöf-Génetay 1990, 192; Tegler 1997. In the international literature, the possible connections between belief in witches' abilities and shamanism have long been debated. The historian Carlo Ginzburg argues that there was a connection. The topic is discussed in a variety of articles in *Magic, Ritual & Witchcraft*, 1/2 (2006).

journeys mentioned led in at least a couple of instances to real places in the local area.

We can never be sure what these women experienced, nor how they perceived their experiences. There is much to suggest, though, that they felt in some way they had left bed while still asleep and were carried away by strange events. It could indicate that their dreams were thought of as journeys of the soul.[53] To the extent that people then believed in the soul journeying while asleep, it is unlikely all dreams could have been interpreted as such experiences; if so, they would presumably have been unusually strong dreams which in some way deviated from the ordinary dreaming state. One hallmark might have been the sensation of giddiness noted in two of the dreams. Vertigo and dizziness are conditions which may have been linked to supernatural experiences, depending on the context.

However the witch trial testimony is appraised, it suggests it was a period when one could wake from an unusually strong dream to an existential dread that the dream was in fact the memory of a supernatural experience. The boundary between dream and reality could in certain circumstances be thought a porous, liminal space.[54] Where such beliefs were widespread, they would have contributed to the rising panic induced by the authorities' witch-hunt.

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[53] This does not mean, however, that the stories were evidence of shamanist beliefs. As Raudvere 1993, 88, notes, religious phenomenology teaches us that soul travel is too general a phenomenon to be evidence of shamanism per se.

[54] Anthropologists and historians have used 'liminality' for a variety of borderline states in human relations with the supernatural (Häll 2013, 26–7). The experience of supernaturality can be said to have a liminal character, with unclear boundaries between inner experience and outer reality, similar to the dreams discussed here.

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CHAPTER 6

Shape-Shifting

In the story of the fishing boat from Mollösund, the witches could change into birds. It was how they were able to reach the boat out at sea. Their transformation was not essential to the story, as we have seen, for according to the stereotype, witches had other ways of flying. The commonest modes of transport mentioned in the witch trials were animals, demons, or tools, with the ability to fly often associated with an ointment the witches were said to receive from the Devil.[1] In the scholarly accounts, in which witches were by definition in league with the Devil, this ointment was something of a recurrent theme.

Before Gertrud told the court about the birds, she had been made to confess to a couple of meetings with the Devil, and she in response to a direct question from the court had said she anointed herself with an ointment to be able to travel to the meetings.[2] It was the court that first mentioned the ointment, and the court record documented a suspicious smear in a dish in Gertrud's house, noticed when she was arrested.[3] When she later explained how they reached the fishing boat, her admission that they had transformed into birds seems to have been spontaneous, and not at

[1] See, for example, Briggs 2002, 48, 91; Östling 2016.

[2] *Rannsakningarna*, 25 Oct. 1669, 128.

[3] *Rannsakningarna*, 128–9. After the basin had been fetched and shown to the court, however, it was agreed it was only butter.

G. Malmstedt, *Premodern Beliefs and Witch Trials in a Swedish Province, 1669–1672*, Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-76120-2_6

the court's prompting. She probably took the idea from popular tradition. It was a widespread notion, found in most cultures and eras, that magic bestowed on the user the ability to change their physical form.[4]

There are examples in Old Norse mythology and literature of some people's supernatural ability to change form at will, their soul taking the shape of different animals. The usual term for this was *hamnskifte* (lit. form shift, from the Old Norse *hamr* or guise), which referred to the figure a person's soul could take.[5] The ability to shape-shift could be hereditary, and then it was thought that the movement of the soul outside the body could often take place spontaneously; however, shape-shifting could also be induced deliberately, and this was the type most often associated with witchcraft.

It is probable these beliefs lived on in many parts of Scandinavia and fed into the stereotype that witches could fly, which would be such a feature of premodern witch trials.[6] In her study of Swedish witchcraft trials in the eighteenth century, Jacqueline Van Gent argues that even then shape-shifting was still part of the rural worldview.[7] During the Bohuslän witch-hunt, courts heard of witches who had changed shape and took the form of various animals. In this chapter, I will examine the testimony about humans in animal form and how widespread the belief in shape-shifting may have been.

Birds

It was Gertrud who introduced birds into the story of the shipwreck. By her account, all but Per Matsson had taken the form of corvids. Traditionally, the raven, the crow, and the magpie were strongly associated with witchcraft and diabolical forces. The raven had a special status because of the association with Odin in Norse mythology and with the Devil in

[4] Behringer 2004, 12–13; Briggs 2007, 122–30; Briggs 2002, 91; Bever 2013, 54; Smith 1978, 96–102.

[5] Ström 1961, 104–105; Strömbäck 1935, ch. 4. As Strömbäck suggested and later research has borne out, in some respects these beliefs are not so very different to shamanism.

[6] The belief some people could shape-shift was also part of the folklore of the mare or night spirit, Raudvere 1995, 41–3.

[7] Van Gent 2009, 73–9. The only examples she cites are milk hares, however, which invites the obvious question of whether they really were thought to be witches in animal form and not magical aids or familiars.

post-pagan folklore.[8] When Gertrud claimed Malin på Härön had taken the form of a raven, it was probably understood as her saying Malin took the lead in the attack on the fishing boat. The magpie and the crow also had the reputation in folklore of being associated with witchcraft and the Devil.[9] The jackdaw also had magical attributes, generally to do with omens and warnings of various kinds.[10] The connection with witchcraft and the Devil does not seem to have been as clear as for the other corvids, though, so the fact that Gertrud said she had changed into a jackdaw should be read as an attempt to play down her role in their evil enterprise.

The bird that really stood out, however, was the wagtail she said was Per Matsson's choice. The wagtail does not seem to have had any diabolical or magical connotations in folklore, being rather a bird with positive attributes and which should be cherished.[11] In among a group of ominous corvids, the wagtail has a fragile innocence that may indicate Gertrud's uncertainty about Per Matsson's role in events. As we have seen, the lay judges on the bench also doubted Per's guilt in this case and he was not convicted for complicity in the shipwreck.

When she first confessed about changing into birds, Gertrud said she could not remember what Anna Persdotter had changed into in order to fly out to the fishing boat.[12] Neither did Börta Crämars have anything to add.[13] When cross-examined again the following day, however, Gertrud said Anna had flown out to the ship in the form of a magpie.[14] So it was that Anna was also incorporated into the story, and as a magpie was said to have had the same shape as Börta Crämars, and was closely connected to the Devil's followers. Anna held out, defending herself against all the accusations, but when after aggressive questioning she was finally handed over to the executioner to be tortured, she gave in and admitted she had been involved. It is conceivable she said she had changed into a tern rather than a magpie to fly out to the boat, which she knew Gertrud had said. She also said it was Gertrud who had 'guised' her in the form of a tern.[15] As a seabird with none of the magical associations of the magpie, it is

[8] Tillhagen 1978, 43–51.
[9] Tillhagen 1978, 67, 76–9.
[10] Tillhagen 1978, 72–3.
[11] Tillhagen 1978, 107–10.
[12] *Rannsakningarna*, 26 Oct. 1669, 129.
[13] *Rannsakningarna*, 132.
[14] *Rannsakningarna*, 27 Oct. 1669, 137.
[15] *Rannsakningarna*, 142; VaLA, GHA 28 Oct. 1669, fols. 230–1.

probable that Anna deliberately chose the tern in order to minimise her importance and participation as best she could. If so, it was futile. Gertrud had said in the confrontation that Anna had been an active participant in every way, to the point of helping throw the crew overboard. Anna's circumstances were further complicated by the fact that there were rumours of witchcraft about both her father and her mother.[16]

During a Danish witch trial a few decades before, accusations had been made that were reminiscent of the story of the Mollösund shipwreck. When a woman from Rømø, an island off the west coast of Denmark, was on trial for witchcraft, she accused another woman from the same island of having been involved in an attack on a boat. Her story was that three witches had flown out to the boat in the form of ravens. They perched on the masts and whipped up a storm by stirring up the sea in the name of the Devil.[17] It is not clear whether the court investigated further, but despite the lack of detail, there are nevertheless striking parallels with the story from Mollösund. In both cases, the witches changed into the same type of birds—corvids—and flew out to sea to sink a boat. The important difference, however, was that the Rømø witches stayed as birds and tried to sink the boat by whipping up a storm with the Devil's help; the Mollösund witches were said to have returned to human form once they reached the fishing boat, and did the work themselves by breaking the mast and throwing the crew overboard. Despite the differences, though, the stories show that more than one coastal community believed in the existence of evil people who took the shape of birds in order to sink boats.[18]

Among the Bohuslän witch trials, there was another confession about witches in bird form. During the trial in the north of the province in 1670, Runnug i Tittås was browbeaten into confessing that she was in league with the Devil and had been at his gatherings several times. When asked who else was there, she named three of her fellow defendants, but added there was also 'quite a large crowd, then like magpies in appearance she thought, and Satan danced among them and gave them some wine to drink': the others who had joined the Devil thus appeared in the form of

[16] VaLA, GHA 28 Oct. 1669, fols. 230–1.

[17] Johansen 1991, 78, citing testimony from hearings in Jutland, Denmark, in 1652.

[18] Another similar story involving shape-shifting emerged during a witch trial in northern Norway 1655. According to the confessions, two women took the shape of birds (a raven and a seagull) and two the shape of seals. Then they swam and flew out to a boat that they sank (Hagen 2003, 31).

magpies.[19] Although Runnug was vague, her description suggests there was a widespread belief that magpies were close to the Devil.[20]

Cats, Dogs, and Goats

In two testimonies, witches appeared in the guise of dogs. In one case, which I will return to later, it was as part of a group of animals which included cats. The second example began with the cross-examination of Per Matsson on the charge of having participated in the Mollösund shipwreck. His mother had been notorious for her witchcraft, and when Per testified that his mother had been visited by several witches, he said they had appeared as dogs. When they came to the house, they thumped 'and scratched at the door, as it were like other dogs'.[21] It is always possible that Per was speaking metaphorically and only meant that the women with their scratching and thumping had behaved like dogs. Yet given Per said it was Easter, and the implication was the women had collected his mother on their way to meeting the Devil, it is likely he meant they really had taken the form of dogs.

Goats were mentioned by one defendant: Ragnille. During a cross-examination, she said Malin Ruths and Marit Byskrivers had been at a witches' sabbat 'in the likeness of white goats'.[22] The court never commented on this, according to the court record, and Ragnille continued by describing the Devil's behaviour at the gathering, which included taking a roll call of all present and noting it in his book. There was no other mention during the witch trials of humans taking the form of goats, but of course, that does not exclude there having been a belief that they could.

By far the commonest animals, however, were cats. In the very first case, Anna i Holta was accused of having taken the form of a cat in order to act on her murderous urges. Malin i Lunden told the court Anna had appeared 'in the likeness of a brindled cat and wanted to tear the throat out of Malin's daughter, and soon thereafter she also wanted to do the same to her husband Lars i Lunden'.[23] Here the witch was accused of

[19] RA, Kommissorialrätt 18 Sept. 1671, fol. 15/207; *Rannsakningarna*, 274.

[20] Ankarloo 1984, 222 notes that witness's accounts of Blåkulla in the witch trials in northern Sweden had witches taking the shape of crows, ravens, or black birds, and while he does not explicitly mention magpies, it is possible they were included among the black birds.

[21] *Rannsakningarna*, 248; RA, Kommissorialrätt 3 July 1671, fol. 39.

[22] *Rannsakningarna*, 27 July 1669, 42.

[23] VaLA, GHA 10 June 1669, fol. 3; *Rannsakningarna*, 23 differs slightly.

disguising herself as an animal in order to harm or kill other people, but not all testimony about shape-shifting made direct accusations of magical attacks. When Ragnille said Malin Ruths had appeared in the form of a cat, for example, it was largely to paint her as a witch. The court in Marstrand had been told by a woman imprisoned with Ragnille that one evening she said they 'should catch them down there in Sandbogen who change into cats'.[24] This did not go unnoticed, and a few days later, the court asked Ragnille which people she was referring to. She said that about thirty years before, the woman she then worked for had gone over to Malin Ruth's to buy bread and found Malin lying on her bed in wet clothes with an injured leg. The reason was that earlier in the day she had been sitting at the edge of the well 'in the likeness of a cat' when her husband came to fetch water, and he had knocked her with the bucket so that she fell in. According to Ragnille, the story was well known and was 'old bruit and talk in the town'.[25] The fact that the injuries Malin supposedly sustained as a cat remained after she had returned to human form was consistent with popular beliefs about shape-shifting. By tradition, shape-shifters' bodies always bore the traces of their doings in changed form.[26]

Malin, who according to the court record was an elderly woman in her eighties, said later when cross-examined that the story of the cat at the well was not about her at all: it was an old story told by a woman called Malin Michels, who said it had happened in Jutland—Denmark, in other words.[27] It seems a credible explanation of the origins of the story, as the cat and well trope has the air of an enduring myth. Ingrid Dinnes spoke of dreaming about her and another defendant's cats being together in a green pasture (see Chap. 4). What she said is generally unclear, but it seems the court considered it to be a confession that the women had met in the pasture. We can assume they also thought the Devil had been there with them. Whether they believed the women had been in cat form at the time is not apparent from the court record.

In another case, a witness came forward to tell the court in Kungälv she had seen witches in the form of cats and dogs meet the Devil. After lengthy questioning and the use of torture, Malin i Viken was forced into

[24] VaLA, GHA 1 July 1669, fol. 7; *Rannsakningarna*, 27.

[25] *Rannsakningarna*, 6 July 1669, 28. The story was later repeated by Ragnille when confronted with Malin in court (ibid. 32).

[26] Ström 1961, 105.

[27] *Rannsakningarna*, 9 July 1669, 34.

confessing that she and a couple of other women had met the Devil at Easter the year before. They met at alderman Johan Niebuhr's shed, where they had been seen by 'Christen with one hand'.[28] Later that day, the court summoned Christen. Asked if he knew anything about the meeting Malin had confessed to, he said at Easter two (sic) years before he saw them at Johan Niebuhr's shed 'at between 10 and 11 or thereabouts on Easter night when he was out walking', when he saw 'a great gathering of dogs and cats, and among them a black man so tall that he topped the roof trusses; there was a great noise of bells … and the longer he watched, the more of them it seemed to him there were'. Alderman Johan Niebuhr, who was on the bench, testified that Christen had told him this shortly after it had happened.[29]

Here, then, it was not a defendant who talked about animal forms, but rather one of the witnesses. No one in court seems to have been surprised by this element in the story—the impression is that they believed in shape-shifting. However, the court was alert to every detail. According to the court record, Malin and Christen referred to two different Easters. Malin said she had only attended one gathering with the Devil and that it had taken place at Easter the year before. The court confronted her with Christen's assertion that the gathering he had witnessed was two years earlier, saying it was plain that witches had met the Devil at the alderman's shed two years in a row. It was the court's opinion that Malin had thus participated in at least two gatherings with the Devil. It should be added that this case was unique, being the only occasion in Bohuslän that someone outside the circle of suspects said they had witnessed a meeting between the Devil and his followers.

Belief in Shape-Shifting

The question is how widespread the belief in people's ability to shape-shift really was. Most of the statements discussed here were made by defendants testifying under extraordinary circumstances, which may well have influenced what they said in a variety of ways; however, two were made by locals and indicate that they too took strange behaviour by cats or dogs as a sign that they were evil people in animal form. It seems probable there was a widespread willingness to read things in that way and that the two

[28] VaLA, GHA 2 Nov. 1669, fol. 124; *Rannsakningarna*, 82.
[29] VaLA, GHA 2 Nov. 1669, fols. 125–6; *Rannsakningarna*, 83.

witnesses did not represent odd or strongly divergent beliefs. Judging by the court record, the members of the court did not find their testimony particularly strange or unbelievable; they simply added it without further comment to the list of allegations.

The Swedish theologian and archbishop Lars Paulsson (Laurentius Paulinus Gothus) in his work *Ethicæ christianæ* (1617–1630) had refuted the belief that the Devil could turn humans into wolves or other animals. He pointed out that there were no credible witnesses to such transformations.[30] Although he was not immediately concerned with witches shape-shifting, the archbishop's objections nevertheless still applied. It was one thing to believe that people could shape-shift, quite another for someone to say they had actually seen it happen. However, just such exceptional testimony was heard at one of the Bohuslän trials.[31]

It was the third Commission in 1671, which was told by the vicar of Marstrand, Lars Påskesson (Lars Paschasius), that his two daughters and another woman had seen Karin Klockars shape-shift. According to Påskesson, the women were standing in a street in Marstrand when they suddenly saw 'a cat come tumbling down the roof, and when he reached to the street he disappeared and Karin Klockars stood there instead'.[32] The cat had changed into Karin Klockars in front of the women. Påskesson's brother-in-law and assistant, Fredrik Nilsson Bagge, told the same story and told the court what his wife had said: that the street was 'narrow, where no man was at that moment in that place. And it came from up on the roof, as if it were a "bundle of foxtails" tumbling down, and when it landed on the street it was Karin Klockars, who had not been there before'.[33]

True, it was not the women themselves who witnessed in court, but it was their close relatives who described their experience. It is not clear why. Perhaps the women were scared of the obvious dangers of featuring in a witch trial, especially as they had not been directly affected in any way. As the father and husband who spoke for them were the town vicar and his

[30] Ankarloo 2007, 189.

[31] Östling, 2001, 71, has two other examples of shape-shifting from the seventeenth century, where children in the north of Sweden claimed to have seen witches change shape back from a goat and a magpie.

[32] RA, Kommissorialrätt, 29 June 1671, fol. 26; *Rannsakningarna*, 237.

[33] *Rannsakningarna*, 237. For Fredrik Nilsson Bagge, see Linderholm 1918, 91. Bagge, who was then in his twenties, was the priest in Marstrand from 1669 until his death in 1713 and served as both a rural dean and a member of the Diet.

assistant, they would have been thought very credible. The men do not seem to have had reservations: they both implicitly believed what they had been told.

It should be added that the younger of the two, Bagge, had been critical of the hearings. His own mother and widow of the mayor, Malin Nils Fredrikssons, was accused of consorting with the Devil by a couple of other suspects. Bagge reacted forcefully and wrote to the Court of Appeal and the witchcraft Commission in 1671 to defend his mother against the accusations. One of his arguments was that one defendant had only denounced his mother so the executioner would stop the torture and that it all stemmed from a powerful enemy's thirst for revenge on his late father.[34] In other words, trials could be unreliable and lead to the downfall of innocent people. Linderholm has identified Bagge as the author of a memorandum on how to deal with witches, which was sent to the town council in Marstrand in 1669. In it, Bagge rejected ordeal by water because it could be manipulated by the Devil, and he advocated caution in other areas too; yet, with certain reservations, he also defended the use of torture and the death penalty for those who were plainly guilty. He also said that witches were not worthy of being called human and were to be regarded as the enemies of the human race and Christianity. Linderholm says that Bagge's essay sums up the established, scholarly, traditional view of witchcraft.[35] In other words, he was convinced that witches existed and served the Devil, and there is no indication he doubted his wife's words.

It appears from the grounds for some of the verdicts that local courts and the Göta Court of Appeal put store by stories about shape-shifters. Admittedly, the court on Orust did not mention birds when it found Gertrud Corporals and the others guilty of having sunk the fishing boat—it only said they had 'been involved in destroying Thomas Andersson's fishing boat and crew'—but Göta Court of Appeal did, singling out from the accusations that the condemned had 'last summer flown out over the Western Sea in the likeness of birds'.[36] In the verdict against Malin Ruths, Marstrand Town Court stated she was 'accused of having been able to make herself in the likeness of brutish creatures'.[37] The Court of Appeal's judgement stated that Malin was so hardened a witch and so possessed by

[34] The letters are printed in *Rannsakningarna*, 209–14.
[35] Linderholm 1918, 77–81.
[36] *Rannsakningarna*, 147; *Rannsakningarna*, 26 Nov. 1669, 152.
[37] *Rannsakningarna*, 51; VaLA, GHA 7 Aug. 1669, fol. 35.

the Devil that she could not be made to confess, despite other witches denouncing her as 'the nastiest hag' and testifying she was able to make herself in 'the image of many creatures'.[38] Both instances used the plural form in their judgements in an apparent reference to Malin assuming the forms of various animals. They may have had in mind Ragnille's story of Malin in cat form falling into the well and Gertrud's testimony that Malin had participated in an encounter with the Devil in the form of a white goat. The fact that shape-shifting was mentioned in the verdicts shows that members of both the local courts and the Göta Court of Appeal believed in it. It was not only witches who could shape-shift, though. During the witch trials, there were signs of a widespread belief that the Devil could appear in a variety of animal forms—a view then common across Christendom.[39] In the Bohuslän trials, the Devil was sometimes said to appear as a dog (usually black, but also grey or white), but also, depending on who was speaking, as a black calf, a fox, or a brown lamb.[40] Although most of what was said about the Devil's various manifestations came from suspects who had been forced to admit they were in league with him, the court never showed the slightest doubt on this front. It was almost as if they expected the Devil to behave in that manner. In one case, it was even the court which suggested it: when Karin Klockars said she had often been plagued by ravens which screamed at her and called out for her blood, the court asked whether the Devil had visited her 'in the likeness of such a raven'.[41]

Layers of Reality

The discrepancy between appearance and true nature was not limited to the conduct of the Devil or the witches: it seems to have been a recurring feature of the premodern worldview. Everyone seems to have been aware that reality had different layers and that something's true essence was not always visible to the eye. The Church's teachings emphasised this

[38] *Rannsakningarna*, 155.

[39] For testimony about the Devil in animal form, see, for example, Briggs 2002, 92 (the Devil as a dog, witches as cats) and Johansen 1991, 72 (the Devil as a dog).

[40] For animals, see, for example, *Rannsakningarna*, 227 (dog), 269 (black dog), 291 (white dog), 243 (black cat), 298 (grey hare), 248 (calf), 243 (fox), and 43 (brown lamb). In other parts of Europe too, the Devil was thought able to appear in the guise of a dog (e.g. Briggs 2002, 92; Johansen 1991, 75–6; Gaskill 2013, 291).

[41] *Rannsakningarna*, 85; VaLA, GHA 3 Nov. 1669, fol. 129.

relationship, which was fundamental to the celebration of the Eucharist, where the nature of wine and bread was altered without any visible changes. Holy Communion was a constant reminder that what was visible was not always its true nature. The Eucharist kept much of this message even after the Reformation. In Lutheran theology, Holy Communion, which remained a sacrament, had a prominent role to play. Although Luther rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation and said the wine and bread never changed in essentials, yet Christ was present as the priest recited the Words of Institution. Communicants received the body and blood of Christ 'truly and substantially present in, with and under the forms' of the bread and wine, as the Lutheran theologians put it.[42] The difference from medieval beliefs, while emphatic theologically speaking, was still subtle, and it is likely that old beliefs about the nature of Holy Communion survived. It is well known that Communion wafers were long used for magical purposes, testifying to the survival of beliefs about the changed nature of the bread once the priest had blessed it.[43]

People in that era thought it was not only demons and witches who walked among ordinary people in disguise: it was equally possible to encounter angels, who could appear in human form. Seventeenth-century Sweden, like elsewhere in Europe, saw a number of popular prophets, who preached that the people should repent and change their ways. Several said they had been commanded by angels.[44] Judging by the stories, angels could take the form of young men clad in white, without wings or other supernatural attributes.

At the same time, a scholarly debate was raging about the reliability of the visual senses. Stuart Clark has demonstrated that scholars increasingly doubted whether the faculty of sight could be trusted as the seventeenth century progressed. The power of illusion and the fallibility of perception were also remarked on in contemporary culture. Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth* is one example, where the tension between seeming and reality is a central theme.[45] There were several factors behind this. Clark singles out the growing interest in optical experiments, alongside the demonological

[42] Malmstedt 2002, 135–7.

[43] Malmstedt 2002, 143–4.

[44] For visions of angels in the early modern era, see Marshal and Walsham 2006; for visions of angels as white-clad men, youths, or children in the seventeenth century, see, for example, Håkansson 2014, 393–4; Berntson 2017, 219; Lennersand & Oja 2001, 186–7, 194; Amundsen 1995, 24–5.

[45] Clark 2007, 236–41.

discussions which often turned on the Devil's various tricks and illusions, to argue that suspicions about sight were fuelled by the vicious religious controversies between Protestants and Catholics about the nature of the Eucharist.[46]

In this period, the belief in a many-layered reality, where what was seen did not always correspond to what was true, was thus a crucial component in people's perceptions of reality.

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PART III

Magical Domains

CHAPTER 7

Powerful Emotions

It emerged in the hearing into the sinking of the fishing boat that Per Larsson was believed to have ruined the marriage prospects of Anna Skaboe's daughter.[1] He was said to have done it in a fit of rage. The background was that Anna five years earlier had taken a Danish priest over to Lysekil by boat. Per considered the ferry business his, and when he realised he was going to lose out on a good fare, he had become angry and told Anna that if she went ahead she would never get married. Anna 'disregarded Per's prohibition, and took the priest regardless'. Since she had remained unmarried, Per's curse was considered to have been effective.[2]

This case shows how an angry outburst could be linked to rumours of witchcraft and by extension the importance which emotions could have in such circumstances. Emotions such as anger, fear, and envy could be crucial in several ways, whether driving the practice of witchcraft or the persecution of witches. And furthermore, in the premodern worldview, strong emotions per se could be taken a sign of magical forces at work.

[1] Preventing someone from getting married was a recognised form of *maleficium* (see Östling 2002, 81).

[2] *Rannsakningarna*, 20 Aug. 1669, 102–103.

G. Malmstedt, *Premodern Beliefs and Witch Trials in a Swedish Province, 1669–1672*, Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-76120-2_7

Witchcraft and Emotions

In the literature on the European witch trials, the importance of emotions has been emphasised in a variety of contexts. In her study of the witch trials in Augsburg, *Witch Craze*, Lyndal Roper highlights the fear and suspicion young mothers felt towards older, infertile women, which would have been compounded by strict views on emotions such as jealousy, anger, and hatred, which were subject to various cultural sanctions.[3] Anger and envy have also been identified by other scholars as central to the witch-hunts. Robin Briggs finds they were ever-present in tales of *maleficium* and witchcraft: anger was considered to underlie the witches' willingness to join the Devil's entourage, and envy could result in evil deeds.[4] Edward Bever argues that although envy was considered an important motive for witchcraft, it was anger which was the driving force. It was a standard belief that anyone afflicted by *maleficium* must have aroused the anger of a witch by some previous injustice.[5]

These were sentiments identified by Jacqueline Van Gent in her study of popular beliefs about magic, the body, and the self in eighteenth-century Sweden, which she suggests still formed an important part of everyday life long after the witch trials had ended. Her point is that the emotions played a central role in both healing magic and *maleficium*, like others, emphasising the connection between witchcraft and emotions such as anger, envy, and jealousy, which were seen as socially divisive forces: a connection so strong that these feelings could be treated as synonyms for *maleficium*.[6]

Although the importance of emotions for witchcraft and magic is highlighted in the literature, it is still an area identified in recent years as in need of further study.[7] Emotional history is a growing international field of research, which offers a variety of starting points and theories of change over time.[8] Opinions differ on whether the emotions should be considered

[3] Roper 2004, 62.
[4] Briggs 2002, 142.
[5] Bever 2013, 53.
[6] Van Gent 2009, 10–11, 61–2, 196–7.
[7] See, for example, Robinheaux 2013, 197; Van Gent 2011, 612; and an international volume on the subject, Ostling and Kounine 2016.
[8] See, for example, Liliequist 2012; Rosenwein 2012; Reddy 2001; Planck 2014, 20–4.

temporally fixed, cultural constructs or universal to the human condition.[9] I would argue that certain basic emotions or affects are as good as universal and can be identified in historical times.

It is possible to trace the emotions identified in the general literature on witch trials in the Bohuslän source material. However, as fear and anger are more clearly expressed than envy, those are the emotions I will concentrate on here. I will begin, though, with a brief discussion of the forms in which envy appears in the material.

In a couple of cases prompted by local accusations, envy was perhaps an implicit motive for the witchcraft. When, for example, Signe Larsson in Marstrand accused Anna i Holta of having put a curse on her daughter, there is a clear sense that jealousy was behind it. Anna had visited Signe and asked to borrow some yeast. When refused, Anna supposedly swore three times that no good would come of it, after which Signe's daughter fell ill.[10] In this testimony, witchcraft was directly associated with the anger Anna expressed when not allowed to borrow yeast from Signe—rage being the emotion that shines through in the court record. Yet jealousy may not have been far behind, as Anna lacked something she thought Signe had more than enough of.

When witches were accused of using milk hares or other magic to steal the milk from others' cattle, jealousy—coveting their neighbours' goods—was the implicit motive. A frequent accusation in witchcraft hearings both before and during the great witch-hunt, it was rare in the Bohuslän trials.[11] The obvious case was Helga i Halltorp, whom Ragnille Jens Svenses accused of witchcraft in 1669, saying she had stolen from her neighbours' cattle. According to Ragnille, Helga 'got as much butter from one cow as others do from sixteen cows'.[12] Helga was not questioned until two years later, when she was brought before the third Commission. The local vicar explained that since he took over the parish twenty-two of his cows had died—at worst, four or five a year—but now in the years Helga had been in prison he had not lost a single one.[13] As milk theft was thought to harm cattle, her vicar's testimony should be taken as accusing Helga of the crime.

[9] Plamper 2015, 5–7 *et passim*.
[10] *Rannsakningarna*, 10 June 1669, 23.
[11] For allegations of theft using milk hares or troll cats, see Linderholm 1918, 37.
[12] *Rannsakningarna*, 42; VaLA, GHA 27 July 1669, fols. 23–4.
[13] *Rannsakningarna*, 7 June 1671, 253.

In the case against Helga, jealousy seems to have been an important motive, as Ragnille denounced Helga for having large quantities of butter. Whenever envy was explicitly mentioned in the court record, it was primarily as the professed reason for witchcraft accusations, and usually using the words for hate or envy. This was the case when Ingrid Jutes came before the court, accused by Ragnille (known by her nickname, Glanan); she countered that 'Glanan had done it out of hatred and envy of her, because Glanan once asked for plants from her and got none'.[14]

Envy, *avundsjuka*, was synonymous with covetousness, resentment, and spite, but it was in its wider sense of hatred and emnity that the word was used in the court records. Indeed, fear and anger were far more in evidence in the written record and therefore warrant a section each. The two emotions were recognised as potent causes: fear played an important role in the persecution of witches, while anger was considered the prime motive for witchcraft.

Fear

Swedish had several words for fear, which much like English was associated with unease, worry, doubt, terror, and panic. However, their meanings differed in important respects. Fear usually referred to feelings in the face of clear, real threats. Anxiety or worry concerned an uncertain future, and though perhaps less intense than fear could be more long-lasting. At the far end of the spectrum were terror and panic, with all that meant in terms of intensity and, usually, short duration.[15] The term used most frequently in the court record was *fruktan*, fear, although unease and terror will also be discussed here.

At the most general level, historians have described the four centuries of European culture from the fourteenth century, when the Black Death struck, to the mid or late seventeenth century, as being marked by fear and worry, prompted by the repeated crises of war, famine, and disease that ravaged the continent. Jean Delumeau and others argue that the premodern worldview added other dangers to this catalogue of disasters in the form of demons and supernatural beings which threatened from all sides. The witch-hunts that swept Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth

[14] *Rannsakningarna*, 232; RA, Kommissorialrätt, 26 June 1671, fol. 18.
[15] For a similar discussion, see Naphy and Roberts 1997, 1–6.

centuries, being examples of panic, are considered part of the same picture.[16] However, this characterisation has rightly been criticised by other historians, and today panic is generally not the first term used to describe the witch-hunts.[17] That said, it must still be acknowledged that the period was in many ways difficult and threatening, and there were signs of collective panic about some of the witch-hunts. This was more true of the witch trials in the north of Sweden than it was of Bohuslän.

Behind every accusation against a witch was the fear of the power she or he was assumed to possess. This fear was often shared by everyone in their community. This was evident in the trial of Karin Sköttes, when Anders Smed, who accused Karin of putting a curse on his cow, announced 'that the whole neighbourhood is afraid of Karin'.[18] The court records explicitly stated on several occasions that people were afraid, as the following examples show.

In some cases, witnesses expressed fear bordering on terror. This was the impression given by a tailor's apprentice, Anders Larsson, who was a witness in Marstrand Town Court in 1669. He spoke of being out early one morning in the week before Easter the previous year and had noticed something that resembled a large bird flying towards him from the north. As it drew closer,

> he saw it was Karin Klockars who came flying, and assuredly recognised her, and even said she had on the red sleeves and black bodice she always wears, and the back of her seemed like a big horse's arse, and she landed on her feet in her own pasture and in her own complete form, at which he was utterly terrified.[19]

Larsson's testimony is unique because it was the only time someone said they had seen a witch flying through the air. It was also relatively unusual for descriptions only to concern fear at the sight of a witch; usually, witnesses concentrated on the harm the witch had done to their accusers. There was another account of a terrifying encounter with Karin Klockars, however, given at one of the third Commission's hearings in July 1671. Karin was still suspected of witchcraft and had been subjected to

[16] Naphy and Roberts 1997, 1–2 and works cited there.

[17] For a critique of Delumeau's and others' portrayal of the premodern period as marked by fear, see, for example, Clark 1983, 69–99.

[18] *Rannsakningarna*, 84; VaLA, GHA 3 Nov. 1669, fol. 127.

[19] VaLA, GHA 3 Aug. 1669, fol. 32; *Rannsakningarna*, 48.

aggressive questioning. A maid came before the court to tell them of seeing Karin at dawn one Maundy Thursday morning when she was fetching water. She noticed Karin had walked up the hill very fast, 'and she looked very wicked about the eyes, so that the maid was terrified of her'. When she got home and told her mistress what she had seen, she immediately sickened and 'lay gravely ill for five weeks'.[20]

In both instances the witnesses had seen Karin Klockars at Easter, which added to the sense of menace, because it was generally believed that witches were particularly active at that time of year.

Officers of the court could be intimidated too. One example was the testimony given by Ingervald, the jailer's servant, after a night spent guarding a suspect in her home. Ingervald had been at Börta Peder Holländers's house asleep when everyone was woken by a strange smell. When the front door was opened, four cats burst in and fought and tore around and raced out again, 'At which he [Ingervald] was terrified, and told the maid to see where these cats had gone.' When she told him they had vanished, Ingervald rose from the bed. He found he was in 'pain', and he was still not fully recovered in court the next day.[21] He probably thought the cats were witches who had done him ill, and thus the story can also be considered further evidence of the belief in shape-shifting.

Most of the local witnesses offered less in the way of drama; generally, they spoke of men or women affected by accidents or illnesses they believed were caused by a witch. There were several examples of how frightening it could be to be threatened, though. If someone had a reputation as a witch, even an angry silence could be enough. That was evident from Anna Olufsdotter's accusations against Elin i Staxäng.[22] Anna testified on two separate occasions about her suspicions that Elin had made her ill. The district court in extraordinary session in Stångenäs in August 1669 heard her describe Elin's behaviour when she came to Anna and her husband Halvard's farm and asked for help grinding some grain. When Elin went off with Halvard to their mill, Anna saw how Elin held him 'around his neck and under his arms with her arms'. The body language upset Anna, and when Elin returned a week later at Easter, she had forbidden Halvard to help her. According to the court record, Elin left 'without a word'. Shortly afterwards, Anna was overwhelmed 'with such fear that she had a

[20] *Rannsakningarna*, 3 July 1671, 247.
[21] RA, Kommissorialrätt 3 July 1671, fols. 35–6; *Rannsakningarna*, 245.
[22] *Rannsakningarna*, 114–16.

dangerous illness long after'.[23] Something as simple as the refusal to do a favour and an ominous silence could be enough to create great unease and, ultimately, ill health. The crucial factor, however, was Elin's notoriety as a witch, as confirmed by the locals in court. According to some, she had had a reputation for witchcraft for at least sixteen years.[24]

Anna repeated her accusations a few months later at a new hearing presided over by the chief district judge and the deputy lawman Nils Thomesen Feman.[25] This time Halvard testified too and new details were added, while the framework of the story shifted slightly. Now Anna said that the incident was in 1658, 'the same year as the country became Swedish', which meant over a decade had elapsed. She still said Elin had touched her husband inappropriately, and she had later pointed this out to him and forbidden him to ever mill grain for Elin again, but she said the disease affected her from the moment she warned him off, and not, as in her previous testimony, after Elin's second visit.[26] The court asked Anna if she had said anything to Elin or if Elin had wished her ill, but the answer was no to both, and Anna stressed that Elin could not have heard her scold Halvard because they were indoors in the farmhouse. Yet she fell ill 'and was always so frightened and melancholy that she had no peace'—and she said she was still not yet fully recovered. Anna did not want to put all the blame for her illness on Elin, but she had been taken ill when Elin was at theirs, and because Elin had such a bad reputation, it was hard to see who else could be guilty.[27]

Halvard confirmed the gist of his wife's story, and it emerged that Elin had been gone home empty-handed from her second visit to the farm. Like Anna's most recent testimony, Halvard said it was in connection with her angry outburst that she fell ill, when Elin first visited. He also said Anna suspected Elin had made her ill. Although the timing of when Anna fell ill differed, the fundamentals of the story were the same: Anna considered her now constant state of worry and fear to be Elin's revenge for having stopped her grinding her grain at their farm. It was obviously still relevant to Anna to make the accusation, despite a decade having passed.

[23] RA Kommission i Bohuslän 27 Aug. 1669, fol. 31; *Rannsakningarna*, 115.
[24] *Rannsakningarna*, 27 Aug. 1669, 114.
[25] *Rannsakningarna*, 118–20.
[26] *Rannsakningarna*, 11 Oct. 1669, 118.
[27] RA, Kommission i Bohuslän 11 Oct. 1669, fols. 10–12; *Rannsakningarna*, 120.

It also emerged that both Halvard and Anna had confronted Elin with their suspicions not long after the incident.[28] Halvard was the first to visit Elin, when he told her they suspected her, but he also asked for advice on how Anna might be made well again. Anna also visited Elin and complained about her distress and ill health. Elin said she was innocent, to which Anna, according to her testimony in court, answered that she did not think Elin entirely guilty, but if she had not come to their farm, she, Anna, might never have suffered the evil that had befallen her. The upshot was that she still blamed Elin, albeit in a cautious, roundabout fashion. During their conversation, Elin's husband Iver came in, and when Anna told him about falling ill when Elin was at their farm, he explained that it had been caused by her fit of rage. He advised Anna to go to Jakob Klockare in Hisingen, who could cure her. She heeded his advice and sent Halvard to consult with Jakob, who, having heard Anna's problems, said he had a cure. He sent Halvard home with three pieces of paper with writing on them for Anna to sew into her clothes, and then after three days she should burn them. This procedure was to be repeated three times, and according to Anna, she felt somewhat better afterwards, although she was still not completely well.[29]

As a different case made clear, those with a reputation for witchcraft could capitalise on people's fears. A long-dead beggar in north Bohuslän called Tru vid Vagnarberget was known for it. In the court's own words, the old woman had 'a reputation for being up to no good, and therefore it was said of her that she went to visit her tenant farmers who were afraid of her, giving them to believe she could have done something to them'.[30] Being up to no good was a standard euphemism for witchcraft: she was a witch who considered those who feared her were obliged to pay her off, in much the same way that farmers were taxed by landowners. In other words, the court's lay judges believed she made a living by deliberately using her wicked reputation.

From the way fear is presented in the court records, it is possible to make some general observations. Plainly, some people were infamous for their witchcraft, and this was a source of worry and fear in their communities. The rumours had often circulated for a long time and helped determine much of the witches' social position, or in other words their persona.

[28] Ibid.
[29] *Rannsakningarna*, 119.
[30] RA, Kommissorialrätt 14 Sept. 1671, fol. 2; *Rannsakningarna*, 285.

Although in some situations worry and fear tipped over into terror, as the first example showed, it seems generally they were not insurmountable fears. Those who considered themselves the victims of witchcraft could seek redress in a variety of ways. One method, which in the literature is said to have been common, was for the victim or a relative to confront the person suspected of having done the magic. Anna Olufsdotter is a good example. Although she was extremely anxious, and she believed the notorious Elin was behind it, her fear did not prevent her from going to see the witch.

Further, it is evident both men and women felt able to admit their fears when it came to witchcraft. The question is whether fear in other contexts was a gendered emotion, more strongly associated with femininity than masculinity. A remark made by Olaus Petri, a leading Lutheran reformer in the early sixteenth century, would seem to indicate it. He wrote that women 'by nature tend to be afraid'.[31] Luther said something very similar: he thought it was in women's nature to be afraid of everything, and that was why they were so superstitious and quick to try witchcraft.[32] This belief about women and fear was probably widespread, and thus, it is reasonable to assume that at least in some contexts fear would be considered unmanly. This does not seem to have been the case for witchcraft, though, as it seems men did not hesitate to admit to being scared and even terrified. Ingervald had no qualms about saying in open court that he had sent a young woman out to look for the horrible cats while he stayed cowering indoors. The impression is that he did not dare get out of bed and with a distinct lack of heroism left the whole nasty business to a woman.

Anger

Anger since the Middle Ages had been counted as one of the seven deadly sins, but attitudes towards it tended to be mixed, at least among scholars.[33] It was primarily uncontrolled, violent anger that was inexcusable; controlled, proportionate anger directed against sinners and offenders, on the other hand, was just. This was the focused rage which both God and the earthly authorities could use to maintain order.[34]

[31] *SAOB*, s.v. 'rädsla', quoting Olaus Petri in 1528.
[32] Brauner 1995, 58.
[33] Enenkel and Traninger 2015, 4–5.
[34] Rosenwein 1998, 324.

According to Aristotle, anger is primarily about a desire for revenge for insults and injustices. The close connection between anger, insult, and revenge survived well into the early modern period. It was only in the eighteenth century that anger, at least in scholarly circles, evolved into a purely psychological phenomenon that was associated less with injustice and revenge, and more with obstacles and frustrations of various kinds, and where the focus shifted to the inner life.[35]

It would seem anger was often openly expressed in the period in question. In a hierarchical society with a strong honour–shame culture, displays of anger could be used to fend off attacks on one's honour or to defend one's social status.[36] The many crimes of honour or violent crimes seen in the courts witnessed to an existence that at times was far from peaceful.

Anger generally played a prominent part in beliefs about witchcraft and was often seen as a direct cause of evil. It was also known for anger to be thought to strengthen the powers of the magical or wise. In her folklore study *The Magic Self*, Laura Stark suggests this belief lived on in some areas of Finland in the nineteenth century. At the same time, as it was thought anger could amplify supernatural forces, fear was seen as a debilitating emotion that left people open to magical attacks. Anger was associated with hardness, fear with softness and vulnerability.[37]

The witch trial records are silent on whether these or similar beliefs obtained in Bohuslän, but they do attest to the more general connection between anger and witchcraft in both content and idiom. In the premodern period, the Swedish adjective *arg* (the English *angry* is its etymological sibling) could mean evil as well as enraged, with overtones of maleficent, known from the Old Norse *argr*.[38] In the Bohuslän witch trials, *arg* was used of witches on more than one occasion.[39]

As the introductory episode with Per Larsson in Mollösund showed, an angry outburst could give rise to long-lived rumours of witchcraft. This was a recurring pattern in the Bohuslän hearings, where behind the local

[35] Enenkel and Traninger 2015, 2–5.

[36] Stearns and Stearns 1986, 21–3. As Österberg 2016, 140–54, has shown, the wrath of kings and princes plays a prominent role in the late medieval rhymed chronicles' accounts of power struggles in Sweden. Her point is that anger was part of feudal culture, and the powerful were quite prepared to show rage in public.

[37] Stark 2006, 281–4, 298.

[38] *SAOB*, s.v. 'arg'.

[39] See, for example, *Rannsakningarna*, 31, 32, 50, 51, 77.

accusations of witchcraft were stories of witches stirred to anger and witchcraft used to exact revenge. The literature suggests the desire for revenge was an important element in popular beliefs about witchcraft. In the premodern worldview, writes Briggs, witches were highly reactive and their actions were often thought of as angry vengeance for various injustices.[40] In a study of witch trials in the Danish region of Jutland in the seventeenth century, Jens Christian Johansen traces how and when suspects originally acquired a name for witchcraft, and finds it was often in situations where they felt wronged in some way and where those around them suspected they used witchcraft as revenge. Note, though, that this applied in accusations of *maleficium* (essentially, all the local accusations), but not in accusations of pacts with the Devil or witches' sabbats, which were usually ascribed to pure evil.[41] In Bohuslän, kinship was also an important factor in witchcraft rumours, but the anger of those who were denounced and their supposed thirst for revenge had an equally prominent role to play. A couple of examples will serve to show the form anger could take.

Several people in Marstrand came forward to lay charges of witchcraft against Anna i Holta, as we have seen. Clearly, some of Anna's accusers feared her anger, as was evident in Bengta Lars Speleman's story. She had accused Anna of causing her husband's death because he had spoken disparagingly about her.[42] It began with a quarrel between Bengta's and Anna's husbands over some herring nets which Bengta had agreed to repair. The work seems to have dragged on, and when Anna's husband retrieved the nets, cross that they were not ready, he bumped into Lars Speleman, Bengta's husband, in the street. He told Lars he was disappointed and then said, according to the court record, 'What a slattern you have for a wife, who lies so and does not finish my herring nets as she promised.' Lars answered, 'Yours is a wanton slattern of a wife who has been before the Bohus Court for being up to no good, and you yourself gave assurance for her in court.'[43]Anna had been before the Bohuslän District Court, accused of witchcraft as the phrase usually implied, and her husband had had to vouch for her: it was an attack on Anna's and her husband's honour. When he got home and told Anna what Lars had said, she was beside herself; so angry, indeed, 'that everything in the house

[40] Briggs 2002, 115.
[41] Johansen 1991, 48–58.
[42] *Rannsakningarna*, 10 June 1669, 23–4.
[43] VaLA, GHA 10 June 1669, fols. 3–4; *Rannsakningarna*, 23–4.

went flying, and she swore that Lars would go to the Devil for it'.[44] When Lars went out fishing the next day, the boat was wrecked and everyone aboard except Anna's nephew drowned. That morning, before it was known the boat had sunk, Anna gone round to Bengta with a jug of ale and said when she had been grief-stricken it had been a comfort to drink. According to Bengta, Anna's behaviour showed she knew in advance what was going to happen, and she was convinced Anna had caused the accident and was guilty of Lars's death.[45]

The men's quarrel in the street was evidence of anger, but it was Anna's outburst which people linked to Lars Speleman's death, and that was not only because she had put a curse on him but also because she already had a reputation for witchcraft. That her rage was so violent and uncontrolled may also have been thought significant. It is hardly likely to have been her husband who told the court that Anna threw things and shouted her curse on Lars: given the living conditions in small towns such as Marstrand, all their neighbours would have heard it as it happened, and Bengta soon after.

People dreaded angering anyone who was rumoured to be a witch, as seen in the trial of Kerstin i Lövri from Hede in the north of Bohuslän.[46] At the district court in extraordinary session in 1671, Lars Olofsson accused Kerstin of putting a curse on his wife Dordi so she suddenly fell ill and died. Lars had been given the county sheriff's permission to take over Kerstin's farm; it is not clear why, but Kerstin was aggrieved and found it difficult to accept the decision. When one day she came across her husband Halvard helping Lars fence off the farm, there was an angry exchange. Kerstin said she had been forced from house and home, and was said to have told Lars that 'a one could depart this life on that account and it would not sit well with others'.[47] Lars protested it was done according to the law and justice, and his maid Karin, who testified in court about Kerstin's anger, said Kerstin's retorted 'To the Devil with law and justice. She did not want law and justice, she wanted one to depart this life.' This last, said Karin, she repeated at least ten times. Kerstin's husband Halvard told the court that what she said 'sounded somewhat bad' and she had

[44] *Rannsakningarna*, 10 June 1665, 24. The court record is unclear about who gave the account of the incident, but it seems to have been Bengta.

[45] *Rannsakningarna*, 10 June 1665, 24.

[46] *Rannsakningarna*, 6–19 Sept. 1671, 264–79.

[47] RA, Kommissorialrätt 6 Sept. 1671, fols. 1–2; *Rannsakningarna*, 264.

complained about losing the farm, but he could not say that she had wished Lars ill.[48]

However, Lars had had another angry encounter with Kerstin since. This time his wife was with him and they were at their new farm for the ploughing. Kerstin appeared, with 'a distaff at her side, spinning as she walked.'[49] It was probably a distaff and spindle she was using to spin with, but either way it was felt to be threatening, perhaps because of the ancient association of magic and certain textile handicrafts.[50] Whatever the case, Lars and Dordi asked Kerstin that 'she not meet them or their plough with the distaff, and asked her to put it away'. She did so, after which there was an exchange not noted down in the court record, but according to Lars, his wife took sick and had to go home. When Dordi reached their house, she was too far gone to get into bed, but collapsed on a chest. The servants found her and moved her to bed, where she lay for five days unable to move, whereupon she died. Her corpse swelled up, and the people who laid her out told the court she had strange holes and boils on her body. It is obvious that Lars and the rest were convinced her death had been caused by black magic. The county sheriff also testified that Kerstin did not have a good reputation. He said she was suspected of putting a curse on the former vicar, who 'about 22 years ago' had crossed Kerstin because he was after her croft. The lay judges added that the priest had fallen ill when he had tried to take possession of the croft. He had died in his bed only a few days later, but only God knew if Kerstin was behind it.[51] The parallels with Dordi's fate were clear, and Kerstin underwent ordeal by water and brutal interrogations that led to her confession and ultimately the death penalty.

In the two examples considered here, the people who voiced their rage at the same time as they were suspected of witchcraft were both women. However, witchcraft was associated with angry outbursts from men too—it being possible that anger was coded as more masculine in premodern culture. In some parts of the country, there were accepted magical methods to avert men's anger. According to Ankarloo, in the far south in Skåne, it was known as 'turning away men's wrath' and was designed to calm a

[48] RA, Kommissorialrätt 6 Sept. 1671, fols. 2–3; *Rannsakningarna*, 265–6.

[49] *Rannsakningarna*, 264–5.

[50] In Norse mythology, the Norns spin the thread of human fate, and in medieval fairy tales and quatrains, both distaffs and looms were associated with magic (Domeij 2006, 130–1; Harrison and Svensson 2007, 72–3).

[51] *Rannsakningarna*, 266.

man's anger with his wife and children or a nobleman's anger with his inferiors.[52]

Anger, however, was by no means exclusively associated with men. Scholars recognised the examples of female anger, if only because rage was associated with the Furies, the ancient goddesses of punishment, and was a feminine attribute.[53] The extent to which ordinary people registered its gender coding is unclear, though. The witness accounts in court about enraged women give no indication it was in any way unusual because of their gender; what mattered, what terrified them, was that they were reputed to be witches.

As Anna Olufsdotter's testimony showed, it was believed that being full of rage could be physically harmful to the person who was angry. Elin's husband Iver said to Anna that her illness was caused by her fit of rage, or as he said to her, 'The blood in you changed when you grew angry', and he recommended she go to well-known healer to regain her health.[54] His remark about changes to the blood is an echo of the ancient theories of the various body fluids or humours, and their importance for physical and mental health. According to humoral theory, the body and state of mind were determined by the four humours: blood, yellow and black bile, and phlegm. An imbalance between the four would cause illness and altered mental states. It was a belief still common among scholars, and Ivar's comment illustrates that it lived on as a folklore tradition too. The fact that Anna seems to have taken Ivar's advice would indicate that she considered his explanation plausible—that it was a possible alternative to witchcraft. If the belief that extreme rage could disrupt the humours and lead to illness were widespread, it may have encouraged a degree of self-restraint, at least where anger was concerned.

Strength of Emotion

Strong emotions could thus be considered physically dangerous to the person who experienced them, yet they were also dangerous to the object of the emotions too. Anger and jealousy could lead to both physical and

[52] Ankarloo 1988, 102–103.

[53] Steenbergh 2012, 129–33., for example, claims that English playwrights in the sixteenth century deliberately portrayed anger as a feminine attribute for political reasons, to countermand an older, aristocratic discourse of revenge and anger as masculine, which would have favoured a culture where aristocratic feuding created instability.

[54] RA, Kommission i Bohuslän 11 Oct. 1669, fol. 1; *Rannsakningarna*, 119.

magical attacks. There was also a very old idea that certain emotions, and above all envy, had a power of their own and could operate outside the emotioned individual. This reflected enduring beliefs which derived from the concept of the *hågˌ* or *hugˌ*. As we have seen, the *hågˌ* was a more inclusive concept than soul alone and included all the individual's innate powers: the emotions, the mind, courage, and thoughts. In people with strong psyches, it was thought the soul was able to detach itself from the body and act independently, as when shape-shifting (discussed in Chap. 5). This could happen both consciously and involuntarily.

Folklore records from Dalarna show that some of these beliefs about the soul lived on into modern times. In *dalmål*, the dialect spoken in the province of Dalarna, the Swedish *hugˌsa*, to consider, means someone using their mind to influence other people, animals, or objects: by staring or thinking hard, they could affect people and animals so they became queasy or fell ill and died. Dag Strömbäck in his work on old beliefs about the soul in various contexts argues that this ability was not always associated with evil, and people with strong souls could sometimes affect others without meaning to. This is not only mentioned in folklore: Strömbäck cites evidence of such beliefs in premodern times, and ultimately they originated in Old Norse thought.[55] Folklore made the connection between envy and the power of the soul, fearing the damage that a malicious mind could do.[56]

Van Gent discusses similar conceptions and the importance of the emotions in her study of Swedish magic in the eighteenth century, noting that jealous people with strong minds were thought able to put curses on important household activities such as brewing and milking. She also considers the concept of *hugvända*, by which someone with a strong mind (*hugˌ*) persuaded (*vända*) others to change their opinion or mood—used in love magic, for example.[57]

The Bohuslän court records never use the terms *hågˌ*, *hugˌsa*, or *hugvända* as such, but in some cases it is possible it was implicitly believed that the defendants had achieved their evil ends by force of mind. This would explain Malin i Lunden's accusation against Anna i Holta, when she said

[55] Strömbäck 1970, 271–3, 1989, 16–27.

[56] For similar ideas in parts of Finland in the nineteenth century, see Stark 2006, 45, 262–6. The belief was there was an innate part of the soul, *luonto* or nature, which could be used in both healing and harmful magic, which as person's *haltija* could also appear outside the body. However, these concepts do not equate to the Swedish *hågˌ*.

[57] Van Gent 2009, 62–3.

Anna in the guise of a brindled cat had attacked Malin's children and husband: it was Anna's soul, her *håg*, that supposedly took the form of the cat. Something similar can be glimpsed in some of the other accusations against Anna. When Signe Larsdotter said Anna had caused her daughter to waste away, nothing was said about how she succeeded in doing so, but it cannot be excluded that it was an unspoken accusation that she had set her mind on Signe's daughter's death. Another woman suspected Anna of causing her aquavit to fail to distil properly on two separate occasions—exactly the type of damage a malicious mind could inflict.[58]

It is also possible that Anna Olufsdotter suspected Elin i Staxäng had made her ill by force of mind, though it is never said what form she thought the *maleficium* had taken—true of several local accusations, where it was probably assumed the witch used her innate power to do the harm.

The story of the maid who was ill for five weeks after seeing Karin Klockars on Maundy Thursday morning might have been put down to the workings of a powerful mind—the only reason given for the maid's illness was that she had caught Karin's 'wicked look' and then told her mistress about when she got home—but it is more likely it was ascribed to the evil eye. This was a slightly different form of witchcraft, which, although it too stemmed from special people's innate powers (which could sometimes be synonymous with the *håg*), was characterised by determinable behaviour. Belief in the evil eye is common to many cultures and was part of premodern Scandinavian folk culture.[59] Anyone who was the target of a reputed witch's anger might very well worry that they were vulnerable to the evil eye.

Emotions such as anger and jealousy frightened people because of the association with witchcraft, while at a general level they constantly threatened to divide communities. In the premodern period, unity, consensus, and harmony were ideals that characterised all levels of society, from the highest echelons of government to individual households.[60] Conflicts fuelled by the emotions, in other words, posed a danger to the social ideals

[58] *Rannsakningarna*, 21 June 1669, 24.

[59] Lid 1935, 18–25; Bever 2013, 4.

[60] Lennersand and Oja 2006 and works cited there. For consensus and harmony as social ideals in seventeenth-century Sweden, see Englund 1989, 27–33.

of the day. Consensus and peaceableness were key in popular religiosity in the seventeenth century.[61]

There were cultural sanctions in place, designed to reduce the expression and impact of these emotions. Perhaps the most important was offered by the Church: the Eucharist. Since the Middle Ages, the Church had taught that people should not receive Communion if they were at odds with any other communicants, and at the start of the service priests could condemn sins such as anger and jealousy. The Eucharist's significance for reconciliation and a sense of community survived the Reformation. The fact that people had to shrive themselves in advance of Communion gave vicars the opportunity to find out whether there was enmity between communicants. It was widely accepted that it was wrong to receive Communion when at variance with others in the parish, and there were also popular beliefs about the dangers of ignoring the prohibition.[62] It was not uncommon in the seventeenth century for people to abstain from Communion for long periods because they were at daggers drawn with their neighbours, while attempts were made to prevent enemies from going up to the altar to take the sacraments.[63]

The link between consensus and Communion was also a fact in premodern Bohuslän. In one of the witch trials, it emerged that those who received Communion assumed there were no lingering conflicts with other communicants and any animosity was forgotten.[64] This is a theme I will return to in a later chapter.

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[61] Malmstedt 2002, 162.
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CHAPTER 8

Spells and Charms

When Börta Crämars was cross-examined about the sinking of Thomas Andersson's fishing boat, she was also accused of having used curses and magical threats on people on various occasions, which were thought to have had an effect. This was a time when words could be freighted with supernatural power. Under certain circumstances, language was a tool for changing physical reality, inflicting harm, and curing or protecting people, animals, and households. In the Bohuslän witch trials, there were two chief aspects of the power of words that recurred in testimonies and confessions alike. There were the verbal threats or *undsägelser* (maledictions) that were generally considered the first tool in a witch's arsenal and which were not dissimilar to *förbannelser* (curses) and the curative or protective spells called *signelser* (charms). And then there was the word of God, which could have a special and very real force. It is these aspects which will be addressed in this chapter.

The supernatural power of words was thought to work in various ways. It was believed that certain words had an innate power that was triggered when they were spoken. The assumption was that words had a direct connection with whatever they signified and that what meanings and signs communicated was real, and not, as we now believe, arbitrary. However, words, if said correctly, could also open a connection to supernatural powers that could intervene in the world. This was the reason for prayer to God, but also for the invocation of other powers. In prayers, language had

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above all an instrumental function; in invocations, its function was communicative. In practice, the different functions of language operated together, while the words were usually accompanied by specific actions.[1]

In witchcraft and magic, words were one of the most important tools and were thought to have the power to harm and to heal. Usually, only the initiated were able to wield this power. Yet there were also simpler forms of verbal magic, such as protective spells, which seem to have been used relatively widely.[2] Linguistically, magical spells are best described as performative utterances or speech acts, as they were predicated on the action of the words when the words were spoken—much like when a judge pronounces a verdict. In order to fully understand a performative utterance, information will be needed about the speech act in its entirety, meaning, for example, the gestures and other circumstances operationalised when the words were uttered. Such information is rarely forthcoming in premodern court records, and instead, we should assume that non-verbal signals reinforced the effect of the words. This applies in all the cases discussed in this chapter.

Maledictions

In the local accusations of *maleficium* in the Bohuslän witch trials, maledictions played an important part because the damage done by witchcraft had almost invariably been preceded by suspects wishing their victim ill.[3] In principle, only two forms of malediction were noted in the court record. The commonest was that the accused told the victim to 'få skam' or go to the Devil, but in some cases, they threatened the victim would have 'en fanens färd', which meant much the same thing—at this time *skam* (lit. shame) was a euphemism for the Devil much used in maledictions.[4] Maledictions were noted in the court record as the suspect having 'lovat ont' (lit. promised evil) or occasionally 'lovat en ond fard' (promised they

[1] Clark 1997, 282–3.

[2] Klintberg 1980, 62, mentions two groups of spells or prayers—those used in the home and when working, and those used to drive off vermin or dangerous animals—which rarely had any secrecy about them and were considered safe to use at will.

[3] Sörlin 1993, 134–5, notes that maledictions were frequently mentioned in the local accusations of *maleficium* in the Göta Court of Appeal in the period 1635–1754. Most *maleficium* seems to have been formulated in the same way as in Bohuslän, but Sörlin characterises it as a 'vague threat' and does not point out that maledictions were in principle the same thing.

[4] See *SAOB*, s.v. 'skam', ¶4.

would fare badly): stereotypical formulations, in other words, used whenever maledictions had to be mentioned, and which show they were well known and had accepted definitions.

In terms of their function, it seems maledictions were equated with curses, even though that word was not used in the court record. In the royal decree on oaths and Sabbath-breaking issued in 1665, curses were described as a grave sin. It gave a list of profanities which were strictly prohibited and stated that 'it is also a sin to curse oneself or another to the Devil, to wish on oneself or on another disease, blight, God's punishment, or other evil'.[5] Here curses appear almost synonymous with maledictions, their sole purpose being to inflict disaster. However, curses were probably somewhat broader in meaning, as they also extended to invocations of God's punishment, while maledictions were limited to threats of witchcraft and the infliction of evil.

To tell someone to go to the Devil was not necessarily perceived as a curse or wishing evil on someone. In a couple of cases, it appears both parties to a conflict told each other to go to the Devil, but this was not picked up on by the court. In the very first trial, the court record stated that Sören Murarmästare's wife told Anna i Holta 'for that you can go to the Devil', when told what Anna had done to her husband.[6] In Börta Crämars's conflict with Truls i Mellby, Börta said Truls had been the first to say it: he had struck her and told her to go to the Devil for taking kindling and firewood; she retorted 'he would go to the Devil first', and when she later confessed to having broken his leg, she defended herself by saying he had said it first.[7] The fact the court seemed unworried by what Sören's wife and Truls had said was probably because the phrase was also a general expletive.[8] It was only under special circumstances that it was thought a malediction. It mattered if the person saying it was reputed to be a witch, but also the way it was said appears to have been significant. The tone, facial expressions, and gestures used to make their point would have added to how the words were interpreted. Unfortunately, the court records seldom provide such details, although there were notes to the effect that this or that defendant had repeated a curse or malediction

[5] *Kungl Maj:ts stadga om eder och sabbatsbrott 1665*, in Schmedeman 1706, 443.

[6] *Rannsakningarna*, 21.

[7] *Rannsakningarna*, 100–101; VaLA, GHA 19 Aug. 1669, fol. 245.

[8] In the sense that the person in question would have to pay dearly, see *SAOB*, s.v. 'skam', ¶1(b).

several times. When Signe Larsdotter refused to lend Anna i Holta some yeast, Anna had said three times that no good would come of it. Kerstin i Lövri was another example, who according to one witness had wished Lars Olsson and his wife Dordi ill 'a good ten times'.[9] The almost incantation-like repetitions would have added to the magic character of the maledictions.

On a couple of occasions, curses are described at length. This was the case in Kerstin i Lövri's trial, because the court was not satisfied with the witnesses' accounts of the evil she had wished on the new owners of her farm: the bench wanted to know the detail of what Kerstin had done when she put a curse on Dordi. After ordeal by water and questioning, Kerstin said she had complained to Ingeborg i Bodilsröd about the injustice of losing her farm. The two women had then decided to put a curse on the new owners. Ingeborg had taken three kinds of feathers, three kinds of hair, and a small yellow stick and stuck them into the ground just outside the farmhouse, saying, 'Let whosoever come, he shall not have great luck.'[10] This curse was far more specific and targeted than the general run of outbursts telling people to go the Devil.

There was another example in the trial of Karin Joens i Uddevalla. Here, rather than the Devil, the curse invoked God. Karin had taken Maret Håkansdotter to court for swearing at her and fighting, but found herself accused of witchcraft. Eli Povelsdotter was one of her accusers. Summoned to court to explain herself, Eli first said it was hearsay: she had accused Karin of being a witch on the strength of other people's stories. She told the court she heard Karin had put a curse on Maret's crops and anyone who ate them by holding her hands 'up in the air', saying, 'Oh God, curse soil, crop, and all who eat of the same crop.'[11] It was God's curse that Karin had called down, then, but it is unclear whether Eli had witnessed it or heard of it. To make her case, she called on the customs officer, Anders Bengtsson, whom she said had heard Karin utter the curse. Yet when he appeared before the court, Anders denied having heard Karin curse the soil or the crop. All he had seen was women arguing.

[9] *Rannsakningarna*, 6 Sept. 1671, 265.
[10] *Rannsakningarna*, 268; RA, Kommissorialrätt 7 July 1671, fol. 6/198.
[11] *Rannsakningarna*, 178; RA, Kommissorialrätt 6 July 1670, fol. 96.

How Maledictions Worked

The question is how people at the time thought maledictions or curses worked. Were the words themselves enough, or did they invoke supernatural forces that acted on the threat? Or were they thought of as a warning that the witch would later use her magical abilities and methods to do the damage?

Given that the Devil was mentioned in the standard forms of malediction, it is conceivable they were perceived as invocations of his power, and in reality, it was this potential which put the threats in motion. However, there is no evidence from Bohuslän that either the suspects or the victims thought this. The fact that the Devil was named meant that the forces of evil had been invoked, which would have been frightening enough, regardless of how the target of the threats thought they would be realised. The attitude of the Church, however, was unequivocal: its representatives said the Devil was always involved if *maleficium* or healing magic had any effect, and this view was also reflected in the law of the land.[12] Nevertheless, that magic was consistently associated with the power of the Devil does not seem to have had much impact on popular worldviews in this period.

This was evident in Karin Joens's case and the government's attempt to regulate oaths and Sabbath-breaking: a curse could also mean wishing God would punish one's enemies. Keith Thomas argues that since the Middle Ages there had been a widespread belief that God could intervene in the world and punish the unrighteous. It was conditional on the person who called down God's curse being greatly wronged and filled with righteous anger; moreover, in principle, only the poor and helpless could hope for God's help. Only under those circumstances, and only if the wrong was very great indeed, was there a possibility that God would heed the cries of the desperate and carry out the curse. Thomas cites several examples from Shakespeare's plays, though noting it was generally considered that God only intervened in particularly heinous crimes.[13] In cases where curses were considered to have had an effect, they were usually said to be witchcraft, but Thomas does not go into the detail of how the curses were then thought to have worked.

Edward Bever suggests the performance of the curse may have been at least as important as the words and their meaning. His point is that the

[12] Oja 1999, 61–5.
[13] Thomas 1971, 505–512.

threat and danger in what was said was largely conveyed by the stress and intonation, tone, and facial expressions, and the utterance of the curse per se could instil a deep fear in its victim, which could result in a physical reaction and symptoms of disease. He also notes the importance of the gaze, and with it the notion of the evil eye—the widespread belief that evil could be transmitted by eye contact.[14]

In Per-Anders Östling's study of Swedish witch trials, he argues that the power of maledictions probably stemmed from a belief in the harmful power of thought. Since, he says, they seem to have lacked a fixed or clear form, they would not have been thought verbal magic in the same way as magical spells or charms were. The words thus had no innate efficacy, and Östling therefore suggests their power probably came from the human mind.[15] This is possible, but the question remains whether maledictions can be divorced from verbal magic. In the Bohuslän material, there was a degree of dependence on the words, as there were in principle only two types of malediction.

The judges who presided over the Bohuslän hearings do not seem to have been convinced that maledictions were effective per se, nor that it was the suspects' thoughts that constituted the magical attacks they were accused of. This much was clear whenever the courts asked how defendants had set about destroying their victims once they had put their curse on them. As we have seen, Kerstin Joens was forced into admitting she and Ingeborg had put a curse on Dordi with the help of magical objects and a spell. Likewise, at the hearings in Tanum in 1671, the court wanted to know how the accused, Gunill Toresdotterr, had managed to hurt Olof's wife Ingrid. Olof testified that Gunill had told his wife to go to the Devil one Wednesday, and the following Friday night she had suddenly fallen ill. Ingrid was up into the loft when she collapsed 'as if someone had winded her and staked her down to the floor, at which moment Ingrid immediately fell so ill that she had to go to bed'.[16] She did not recover until Olof brought in a well-known healer from the area. Judging by Olof's story, it is conceivable the victims thought that it was Gunill's *hågg* or mind that had felled Ingrid in the loft. The court seems to have had other ideas,

[14] Bever 2008, 23–5.

[15] Östling 2002, 78–9, believes that maledictions only 'partly' correspond to 'modern' curses, but at the same time, it is unclear what he means by differentiating between them as past and modern concepts.

[16] RA, Kommissorialrätt 14 Sept. 1671, fol. 2/218; *Rannsakningarna*, 285.

though. Once ordeal by water and brutal interrogations had forced Gunill to denounce other witches and confess to being in league with the Devil, she also 'finally' explained how she had put the curse on Ingrid. She said that she had put three pinches of soil from the churchyard and three grains of barley in a pouch, which she had then thrown into the loft where Ingrid would walk.[17] The court was satisfied with that explanation. Indeed, it is likely it was the hoped-for result of their persistent questioning. In accordance with scholarly beliefs about witchcraft, the court might have been seeking explanations where the Devil or a familiar did the harm, but it seems that magical rituals and aids were considered most likely.

Given the variety of disasters that maledictions could result in and the different time intervals that elapsed between the curses and any result, it is probable there were different interpretations of how maledictions worked. In the last two examples, the court seemed to think the curse was a threat of witchcraft yet to come, and therefore, the malediction itself did not have any real power. However, it is probable that there were enduring popular beliefs about the evil forces which could be set in motion simply by uttering a curse. In some cases, people could well have feared that evil was transmitted directly during a confrontation, whether by physical contact or because of the evil eye; in other, it is possible they imagined it was the witch's mind that attacked them—Olof's account of his wife's sudden illness is open to that interpretation.[18] It is also conceivable that some may have shared the court's opinion that the *maleficium* took place after the curse and that it was only at that point witchcraft had been employed. In every instance, however, the specific wording of the curse signalled to the target that they would be the victim of witchcraft, an awareness presumably reinforced by the exact manner in which the curse or malediction was performed, the witch's tone of voice, facial expression, and perhaps gestures. For that was a necessary condition: that it was a witch, known for her magical ability.

Considered as a performative statement, a malediction meant the victim's status changed as soon as the words were uttered, becoming 'an accursed person', open or receptive to all possible forms of misfortune.[19]

[17] *Rannsakningarna*, 15 Sept. 1671, 292.

[18] The belief that evil could be transmitted directly by a look (the evil eye) or through physical contact was occasionally referred to in contemporary literature, for example in E. J. Prytz's *Magia Incantatrix* from the mid-1630s (see Sörlin 1993, 135–6; Ankarloo 1984, 106). For the same beliefs across Europe, see Bever 2013, 4.

[19] For an analysis of curses as performative utterances, see Little 1998, 27–8.

It was a great source of worry and led victims to interpret all future mishaps as caused by witchcraft.

Weapons of the Weak

Fear of witches and ill-willers was an opportunity for the vulnerable, such as single women, to defend themselves.[20] Maledictions and curses were frightening weapons in various forms of social conflict.

This can be seen in a couple of the Bohuslän cases. When Ingrid Dinnes was tried as a witch on the word of another suspect, a burgher of Marstrand, Hans Bengtsson, came forward to accuse her of *maleficium*.[21] He had approached Ingrid and asked her to whip her son as punishment for harming his son with a stone. When she refused, he grabbed the boy himself 'and hit him a little', whereupon Ingrid rushed at him with a knife held up to strike. He disarmed her and hit her on the mouth so she began to bleed. Then 'she maledicted him'. Not long after, Hans had fallen ill and 'lay like a wretched person' for eighteen weeks, unable to get out of bed.[22]

Ingrid complained to the court that she had been assaulted and beaten in her own home. She was the wronged party and firmly denied that she had caused his illness or 'wished him ill'. Hans countered that he had been afflicted by 'such an inward sickness' that it was beyond human explanation, meaning that he assumed witchcraft was involved.[23] When Ingrid was later sentenced to death for consorting with the Devil, Hans's illness was not mentioned among the grounds for the verdict.[24] It is possible the court did not consider his was a case of *maleficium*.

We will never know the truth of Hans's accusations of malediction against Ingrid. Yet the scenario as he described it—a mother trying to defend her son with a weapon and then, when the man uses his superior physical strength, with a malediction—seems credible. There is another testimony in which a lone woman used malediction to fend off a brutal man. Karin Joens was accused in Uddevalla Town Court of having been the cause of several misfortunes that had befallen a man called Fredrik. When Karin's pigs had broken into Fredrik's field and trampled his crop,

[20] This has also been noted in the literature. See, for example, Sörlin 1993, 134–5; Oja 1994, 51.

[21] *Rannsakningarna*, 1 July 1671, 242.

[22] RA, Kommissorialrätt 1 July 1671; *Rannsakningarna*, 242.

[23] Ibid.

[24] *Rannsakningarna*, 259.

he had cut off the legs of one pig with his sword. Karin had hurried out to see what was going on and swore that he would 'go to the Devil' for it. Three or four months later, Fredrik's farm burnt down, and he met with a series of other accidents that Karin was blamed for.[25]

However, it appears that at the hearings Karin had poured frightening maledictions on a woman without it being considered a defensive act. She ended up at odds with the farmer Jakob Bringelsson and his wife over the repayment of a loan she had made them. When Karin did not get the cow she had asked for instead, she went to Jacob's wife and, according to a witness, said, 'I will strike you with the long scythe, so go to the Devil, no good will come to you by that cow,' and on reaching home, she found the cow was sick and its milk had dried up. It was thought to be a direct result of Karin's malediction.[26]

In the Bohuslän trials it was primarily women who were accused of malediction, which was hardly surprising given so few men were investigated. From a survey of the allegations of malediction, it transpires they were more likely to be directed at women than at men. In a couple of cases, husband and wife were affected by the same malediction.[27] It cannot be argued that the typical example was a lone woman who used curses to defend herself from a threatening, brutal man. In addition to the two examples mentioned above, there were other cases of this kind. Whether it was men or women who were put under the malediction, the pattern was for the supposed witch to be in a position where she felt aggrieved and even angry, and had said as much. It could be a situation where she was at a disadvantage, but that was by no means always the case. At the same time, as these examples show, in certain vulnerable situations curses were a useful weapon for people who were up against physically stronger enemies. It is possible the mere reputation of being a witch, able to translate maledictions into serious misfortunes, was adequate protection and prevention.

[25] *Rannsakningarna*, 7 Jan. 1671, 193.

[26] *Rannsakningarna*, 199; RA, Kommissorialrätt 20 June 1671, fol. 100.

[27] Of the twenty accusations of malediction found in the court records, women accounted for eighteen. Of these, nine were directed against women, seven against men, and two against couples. The remaining two related to men who had directed maledictions at women.

Charms

In healing and protective magic, words and verbal magic were deeply significant. The spells that were commonly used were called *signelser* (charms), with echoes of the *välsignelser* (blessings or benedictions) chanted by priests and monks in the Middle Ages. After the Reformation in Sweden, when the mendicant orders were disbanded and the monasteries dissolved, itinerant monks were said to help spread the use of benedictions and protective words to the population at large.[28] Charms were also derived from sources such as grimoires and in some cases can be traced to pre-Christian times. Over time, a system of local experts grew up, often described as wise women or men and known for their vast knowledge of charms and other forms of healing magic.

Charms were used to cure humans and animals of disease, but also for snake bites or toothache, for example, or to staunch wounds. Some were protective and were said to prevent evil from attacking people, animals, or important household tasks. Nigh-on universal, the simpler forms of protective spells could be said by anyone, without the need to call in an expert.[29]

The Church was strongly critical of charms and viewed them as a brand of witchcraft which relied on the Devil to be effective. This had no real impact on their popularity, though, to the point where the general opinion was it could not be a sin to seek protection or redress in this way. In several Swedish trials, people charged with using charms strenuously defended themselves by saying their power came from God and that it could not be a sin to help their fellow human beings. This was also the attitude of those put on trial for calling on the services of wise women or men for cures or protection.[30]

In the Bohuslän hearings, several defendants came under pressure to confess they used charms. This usually occurred in the initial cross-examination and thus was perhaps a defendant's first concession to the court's demand that they confess: they admitted to using charms in the belief that it was not a serious sin.

That seems to have been the case at Karin Sköttes's trial. She was tried in Kungälv in 1669, accused by Malin i Viken of attending gatherings

[28] Klintberg 1980, 13–17.
[29] Klintberg 1980, 62.
[30] Oja 1999, 189–93, 285; Sörlin 1993, 94–5.

where the Devil was present. Karin flatly denied the allegations. At a hearing a few weeks later, however, she was approached by the priest and the town clerk who encouraged her to confess, and she told them about a charm her mother had taught her. When a cow calved, you should give it salt and malt, and seize its udder and say, 'I milk with 10 fingers 12 tongues for 13 months in three names, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.'[31]Over the following weeks, the court returned to the charm at several stages of the cross-examination. The fact that Karin had learnt it from her mother, who had been executed for witchcraft several decades earlier, was an aggravating circumstance, but the court seems to have viewed charms with great suspicion generally. Cross-examined repeatedly, Karin maintained she had never learnt any witchcraft. She explained to the court that the charm and its ritual were to stop the udder from swelling and to prevent witches from using the cow. When the court asked, she could not explain what the twelve tongues meant; she had heard others say it, so she did too.[32] Later it became clear that, unlike the court, she did not think she had committed a sin by saying something in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. As the court record stated, 'Neither did Karin think that she had sinned with her use of charms'.[33]

Charms were also the first thing Karin Joens admitted in court, in her case after several cross-examinations, ordeal by water, and repeated torture. She said a woman called Malin i Glimmingen had taught her 'how to guard her own from others'—protective spells, in other words. Thus, she had learnt a long spell to be said when she was herding her cows to pasture, which ended, like many other charms, with the Holy Trinity being named.[34] It began by apostrophising the Virgin Mary, and it was noted that Karin crossed herself while reciting it, a common gesture with charms (it is telling that the Swedish verb *signa* could mean both to charm and to make the sign of the cross).[35] Karin also said the following spell she had used when churning butter:

> In 3 names I churn my cream:
> butter of the East,
> butter of the West,

[31] *Rannsakningarna*, 65; VaLA, GHA 1 Oct. 1669, fol. 177.
[32] *Rannsakningarna*, 22 Oct. 1669, 79.
[33] *Rannsakningarna*, 83; VaLA, GHA 2 Nov. 1669, fol. 125.
[34] Printed in Linderholm 1940, 127–8.
[35] *SOAB*, s.v. 'signa'.

butter of the North,
butter of the South
and butter of all my enemies!
In 3 names:
The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.[36]

The Holy Trinity had a key part in this charm, but it was not viewed kindly by the court. In its verdict, the third Commission stated the spell could not be thought primarily protective and in fact was designed to take advantage of others (and to take their butter). The court homed in on the words 'butter of all my enemies', which they said referred to all who 'cleaved to God'.[37] Thus, far from being a protective charm, it was a malicious spell—*maleficium*.

At the hearings in Tanum, it emerged that some of the witnesses who considered themselves the victims of witchcraft had hired healers, who managed to make them healthy. Olof Tronson said a woman called True vid Vagnarberget, now dead, had cured him of the sickness he had suffered from when his stepmother, Marit Anundsdotter, maledicted him. When Marit's maid, Gunill, then put curse on his wife, they had brought in True's daughter, Börta vid Vagnarberget, and she restored his wife's health. Olof's brother-in-law, Rear Bengtsson, said he too had been helped by healers when he had fallen ill, 'maddened' after Marit had put a curse on him. His father first went to Marit i Yttene, who had previously cured him of back pain, but apparently, she was not as successful with Rear, because he and his father later went to a woman in Norway who cured him completely.[38]

The witnesses had intended none of this as an accusation, but the court, presided over by the zealotic deputy lawman Feman, smelt witchcraft and sent for both Börta vid Vagnarberget and Marit in Yttene to explain themselves. Börta said nothing about charms, only that she had given Olof's wife bread and butter to eat. According to the witnesses, however, she had secretly sprinkled a powder on the bread, but she denied it outright. As the court considered Börta to have healed people in a way 'which is like to witchcraft', and by then another defendant had accused her of attending a gathering with the Devil, it decided she should undergo ordeal by water.[39]

[36] Quoted in Linderholm 1940, 131; *Rannsakningarna*, 224.
[37] *Rannsakningarna*, 256; RA, Kommissorialrätt 8 July 1671, fol. 55.
[38] *Rannsakningarna*, 14 Sept. 1671, 285–296.
[39] *Rannsakningarna*, 289.

After that and having been tortured, she admitted to being in a pact with the Devil and went on to denounce the other healer, Marit i Yttene, of the same.

When her turn to appear came Marit denied Börta's accusations, but then the court demanded an explanation of how she had tried to cure Rear. She admitted she had given him something to drink, but would not say what was in the bottle. She added that she used to help people by giving them charms for twists and sprains and against 'morsot' ('the mother', lit. mother sickness, probably gynaecological).[40] Marit said she had learnt the charms from women who visited her mother when she was a child. The court wanted to hear the charm against sprains, so Marit said the following spell:

> Our Lord Jesus rode over the turf,
> his horse staggered,
> his best leg was sprained.
> He got off,
> he charmed his horse himself:
> for bone sprain and blood sprain,
> for all sprains,
> which fare on the wind!
> In the 3 names, the Holy Father etc.[41]

This charm falls into the category of epic spells and was probably a simplified variant of a charm known across Europe, the second Merseburg incantation, which can be traced to a tenth-century manuscript, although here rather than Odin it was Jesus riding the horse which sprains its leg and has to be charmed.[42] Like most charms, it ended in the name of the Holy Trinity. Marit plainly did not regard the charm as witchcraft; as she herself put it, charms were about helping people. The court did not agree, and among its reasons for subjecting Marit to an ordeal by water, it stated that the charm was 'the beginning of such devilry and witchcraft'.[43] After ordeal by water and then torture, Marit confessed to being in league with the Devil and thus, like Börta, was sentenced to death.

[40] *Rannsakningarna*, 294–5; RA, Kommissorialrätt 15 Sept. 1671, fol. 15/231–16/232.
[41] Quoted in Linderholm 1940, 433; *Rannsakningarna*, 295.
[42] For the second Merseburg incantation, see Klintberg 1980, 48–9.
[43] *Rannsakningarna*, 16 Sept. 1671, 297.

Marit's daughter, Gertrud i Kittelröd, was also tried at the same time on the same charges of attending witches' sabbats. She had been denounced by Gunill, who had been accused of putting a curse on Olof Trondson's wife. Gunill had been in Gertrud's service, and once she was churning butter, Gertrud had been irritated by how long it took. She seems to have thought it was because Gunill had not said the charm to protect the butter and, scolding her, said if Gunill did not know the 'churning lesson', meaning the butter charm, she was of no use to her. Gertrud took three spoons of the cream and threw them on the fire and commanded Gunill to 'say Our Father, and do not say forgive us our sins': then the person who had put a curse on the milk would be revealed.[44]

When Gertrud reappeared before the court, she denied witchcraft and the pact with the Devil, but like the others was sent for ordeal by water, brutal interrogations, and torture. During the torture, at first she only admitted that her mother had taught her charms for sprains and snake bites, but later she also admitted to consorting with the Devil and was sentenced to death.[45] Another of the women who stood trial in north Bohuslän admitted to using charms: Marit i Gerlöv, who after aggressive questioning confessed she had learnt the charm for 'the mother' from a 'man travelling northwards who came from the south'.[46]

In the final stages of the Bohuslän trials, two women were cross-examined by the district court in extraordinary session in Rogsta in 1672. Both denied having attended gatherings with the Devil or knowing witchcraft. However, one of them, Karin i Sandåker, did say that she used charms for illnesses and the like. Then she recited charms for sprains, toothache, and cattle, and a long prayer-like charm to be said over certain roots dug up on Midsummer's Eve to be given to the livestock.[47] In addition, she read the following charm for *tossebett* (lit. toad bite), the 'evil bite' thought to cause ulcerating wounds in humans or animals[48]:

Christ walked,
and Toad walked:
Whither will you go?
said Jesus.

[44] *Rannsakningarna*, 290 f; RA, Kommissorialrätt 15 Sept. 1671, fol. 9/225–10/226.
[45] *Rannsakningarna*, 18 Sept. 1671, 273–75.
[46] *Rannsakningarna*, 277; RA, Kommissorialrätt 19 Sept. 1671, fol. 18/210.
[47] *Rannsakningarna*, 22 Jan. 1672, 321–2; Linderholm 1940, 360.
[48] *SAOB*, s.v. 'tossebett'.

'I shall go to the man,
bite bone and suck blood.'
'That I forbid you,'
said Jesus.
In the 3 names:
Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost.[49]

It was Toad who had the evil bite and thus may have been a personification of the disease.[50] The implication is that Jesus forbids the attack. In all the charms Karin recited, Christ played a prominent role: in the spell against toothache, he alone stood for magical power, while the other charms also mentioned the Virgin Mary, St Peter, and St Michael.[51]

The charms were the only thing Karin admitted to, and the court was not as strict as in previous cases: the women were not made to undergo ordeal by water, and although they were threatened with torture at the hands of the executioner because they had been to witches' sabbats, it does not appear to have gone ahead. The final verdict, which was issued by the Court of Appeal, was lenient. The women should do public penance in church, and then their vicar was to admonish them to cease using charms and other similar 'mischiefs'.[52]

At the hearings, then, both healing and protective charms were mentioned. The healing charms were used to remedy sprains, gynaecological ailments, toothache, and 'evil bites': among the commonest conditions that called for such treatment, as would long be the case, given the enduring folk tradition.[53] They were probably widely known—and used by people who were not known as healers or wise women—while some were veiled in secrecy.

The protective charms that came to the court's attention all related to female concerns: churning butter or tending to livestock. They existed to provide protection from various dangers, which could include evil people and their witchcraft. Judging by Gertrud's irritation at Gunill not knowing the 'churning lesson', the simpler protective spells for key tasks around the home and on the farm were common knowledge.

[49] Quoted in Linderholm 1940, 371; see also *Rannsakningarna*, 22 Jan. 1672, 322.

[50] A *tossa* or *tosse* could be either a toad or a frog (see *SAOB*, s.v. 'tossa') and may have been thought originally responsible for the bite.

[51] The charm against toothache is printed in Linderholm 1940, 426.

[52] Linderholm 1918, 270.

[53] Klintberg 1980, 20–1.

The fact that several defendants only revealed their knowledge of charms after a series of cross-examinations and sometimes even torture should not be taken to mean that they thought charms were witchcraft or a skill associated with the Devil. Indeed, they strongly opposed such notions, and the same is known from contemporary trials elsewhere in Sweden. Besides, some protective spells were specifically designed to counteract or prevent witchcraft. Suspects were aware that the Church disapproved of charms, and by confessing what they considered minor offences, the women may have hoped to end their interrogations. The reason why some confessed so late in the day may have been that it really was secret knowledge.

Most of the spells that the accused recited in court had an epic form. Historians distinguish between various categories, such as meeting spells and wandering spells.[54] Meeting spells turn on the encounter between a deity and either an evil being or a suffering person. The charm against the 'evil bite' quoted earlier was an example, as it had Jesus meeting an evil spirit of disease, Toad, and forbidding it to do harm. The spell against evil is performed by the powerful deity—in this case Jesus. The spell in its basic form is very old and can be traced back to ancient cultures.

Wandering spells lacked dialogue. Instead, what matters was the action and the idea that the magical power used by the divinity in the story would also work in real life, healing whatever it was one wanted to cure. The story of Jesus dismounting to charm his horse is an example, and point being that the magical power of the story would cure sprains in both humans and animals according to the principle of like cures like.[55] This too had a long history. The oldest known example, the Old High German Merseburg incantation, features pagan gods rather than Jesus or other biblical figures.[56]

As all these examples show, the charms invariably concluded by naming the Holy Trinity. There are indications that the person reciting the charm ended by making the sign of the cross and possibly did so during the charm too. In other words, this form of verbal magic had a Christian framework, which suspects often referred to when they said it was not a sin to use charms.[57]

[54] Klintberg 1980, 45–8.
[55] Sometimes referred to as 'epic similarity spells' (Rooth 1975, 116).
[56] Klintberg 1980, 48–9.
[57] Oja 2005, 307–308.

The Word of God

By way of conclusion, I would also like to illustrate the special power ascribed to the word of God in certain situations. In the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth, there were areas of Sweden where congregations chose to repeat aloud certain passages of the service spoken by the priest. The behaviour was often described as the congregation 'massing'. There were no liturgical instructions that called for it; rather, it was an expression of popular piety and a special reverence for holy words. Congregations tended to 'mass' when the priest said the Words of Institution, which signalled Christ's presence in the sacramental bread and wine. This behaviour was not welcomed by the Church, and several priests at the end of seventeenth century complained that their congregations' loud chanting was not conducive to worship.[58]

The special significance of the Words of Institution was also evident in the witch trials. Börta Sunnerborg, denounced by Malin i Viken as one of the Devil's companions, admitted after several cross-examinations that she had learnt her witchcraft from Malin. She had also 'told her not to say the Words of Institution after the priest, which he sings at the altar when the people go up to the table of God'. At the next hearing, she returned to the subject, saying that Malin had 'forbidden her to say the Words of Institution … and on account that she might better serve Satan'.[59] The story implies that repeating the Words of Institution was believed to create a special connection with God. It is less clear whether there was also a widespread perception that this made it difficult to commune with the Devil. Perhaps Börta was trying to say what she thought the priests and the court wanted to hear. It does seem clear, however, that 'massing' by congregations was thought especially significant.

A couple of witnesses demonstrated the kind of protection offered by God's word against the Devil and his demons, who turned away when the words were uttered. In 1671, the head jailer in Marstrand, Lorentz, told the third Commission of his remarkable experiences of guarding Ingeborg Slaktares. One of the town guards had come to find him one evening to warn him there was a terrible noise coming from the hut where Ingeborg was being held. The guard feared that the Devil was about to break her

[58] Malmstedt 2002, 133–4.

[59] VaLA, GHA 21 Oct. 1669, fols. 112–113; *Rannsakningarna*, 74–5; Malin's order was mentioned again later (*Rannsakningarna*, 22 Oct. 1669, 79).

neck. Lorentz took two other men and went to the hut to investigate. As they approached, they became aware of 'the din and the whole thing rattling, shaking, and swaying, just as if sawing a piece of iron or an iron bar'. The men had lit a candle, and Lorentz went inside to Ingeborg and recited the word of God, whereupon the noise subsided. When he finished and tried to question Ingeborg, the noise grew louder again, and the jailer thought that 'the din came from overhead'. The uproar was so loud that the two men he brought with him, a tailor and the harbour master, who were in the doorway, could not hear what was being said in the room.[60]

The court then questioned the guard who had fetched Lorentz. Once he was sworn in, he described hearing terrible noise from the hut where Ingeborg was imprisoned, a sound 'like tipping out a bag of copper coins. And a gnashing of teeth.' The guard had ordered the Devil to leave 'in Lord Jesus' name', and the noise ceased. The moment he stopped reciting God's word, however, the noise returned. The other two men who went with the jailer to Ingeborg's prison swore they too had heard the din that shook every corner of the hut and the roof.[61] As it was evening, it is possible the jailer was in the tavern in the company of the two men when the guard alerted him about the pandemonium in Ingeborg's prison. In other words, it may have been a group of drunken men who went to investigate. Apparently, there must have been some form of exchange, because the jailer said Ingeborg had admitted that the famous witch Anna i Holta had taught her how to make good ale. Regardless of the exact circumstances, it is likely the men thought they really had experienced the terrifying noise and the effect that God's word could have. They all testified in court on oath, and it was a time when perjury was considered a terrible crime.[62]

Another witness to the power of God's word in warding off the Devil, or possibly one of his demons, was heard by the first Commission in 1669. Anna Nielsdotter from Mollösund described a horrific experience in Per Larsson's boathouse. When one day when she was passing the boathouse, she heard squealing from inside 'as if small pigs'. Anna pushed open the door and fell forward into the boathouse, where there was a keg standing in the middle of the floor. In the keg was 'a small, grey goat. His eyes were like fire and she could see he was bleeding from the neck, and he kicked as if he wanted to get at her.' The word used for the beast, *söd*, had various

[60] *Rannsakningarna*, 245–6; RA, Kommissorialrätt 3 July 1671, fol. 36.

[61] *Rannsakningarna*, 246; RA, Kommissorialrätt 3 July 1671, fol. 37.

[62] Respect for sworn testimony was evident on several occasions when witnesses hesitated to swear the oath because they were unsure about the truth.

meanings in the period, but here it was probably synonymous with goat, an animal associated with the Devil. Anna plainly thought she was facing the Devil or possibly one of his demons. At first she was afraid, but her courage returned because of the word of God, and she dared to look around the boathouse, at which she discovered that Per's wife was hidden behind the door with her left hand behind her back. They looked at each other without saying a word, and then Anna turned and left. In other words, she testified to having caught Per's wife mid-encounter with the Devil, and the word of God had protected her at this terrifying moment.[63]

The belief in the power of God's word evident in all these witness accounts was in line with the Church's teachings and general attitudes at the time.

The Power of Words

As this chapter has shown, certain words could have supernatural power when uttered, to a variety of ends: they could cast out demons, heal, or protect, but they could also do harm. People, animals, important tasks, and the general happiness of the household could all be affected by powerful words. In some cases, the words' magical meaning only became apparent in hindsight. This was especially true when someone wished an enemy ill and told them they were to go to the Devil. If the other person then suffered an accident or other misfortune, those hasty words, perhaps used only as expletives, might be remembered as an evil curse. For that to be the case, though, it seems the person doing the cursing had to have some sort of reputation as a witch.

Simpler protective spells could be used by anyone who knew them. The more powerful spells, however, were mastered only by those who possessed special knowledge of healing or *maleficium*—and in some cases, it was probably possible for one and the same person to master both. In order to be effective, it may not have been enough to know the words and how they were pronounced: special gestures and other heightened elements were probably required in many cases. Although the court record is almost silent about what they might have been, it appears the sign of the cross was used extensively, while maledictions may have been repeated a number of times in a row. In one instance, it seems that as person uttered a curse she raised her hands to the sky.

[63] *Rannsakningarna*, 117; VaLA, GHA 22 Sept. 1669, fols. 268–9.

The principle was that when everything was done in accordance to an accepted formula, the words created connections with strong supernatural forces. In the charms, these forces often took the form of Christ, Mary, assorted saints, and the Holy Trinity. However, given the ancient roots of some spells, it is possible it was also imagined that older, more shadowy powers were wakened. Regardless of how the supernatural powers were perceived, the words opened the way to contact with them to malicious or benevolent ends.

The belief in the potential power of words was echoed by more generally established beliefs. It was also borne out in part by the Church's teachings. Priests, for example, shared the view that the word of God could drive off the Devil and his demons, and it was not unknown for them to fuel parishioners' fears that the Devil might appear at the very mention of his name. The importance of the Words of Institution to the Eucharist will have given people even greater confidence in the power of language, and the Church encouraged its flock to pray diligently, both collectively and individually.

Awareness of language's relation with supernatural forces may have increased people's responsiveness to how others formulated themselves—perhaps especially so for those who had a reputation for being skilled in obscure arts. A greater responsiveness to language and idiom was evident in the Church too. One expression of this was the Swedish Church leadership's determined efforts throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to end what they feared was widespread swearing, taking God's name in vain. As a result of the Church's representations on the subject, a detailed royal decree was issued against oaths and swearing in 1665, which also covered, as we have seen, curses.[64]

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CHAPTER 9

Charged Matter

Witchcraft was said to operate through the strength of mind which certain people were thought to possess or through the utterance of words that had supernatural power. There was another important medium, though, and that was the objects or things of various kinds which were charged with magical power. This belief was evident at the hearings in Mollösund, when the court suspected Gertrud Corporals had an ointment that gave her the ability to fly. When she was brought in for questioning, it was noticed that in a chest she had stored a dish with the remains of some ointment in it. The county sheriff asked her if it was the ointment she had previously confessed the Devil gave her, and despite the fact Gertrud said no and explained it was only butter, the court still sent for the dish for closer inspection. It transpired Gertrud was telling the truth. It was found there was also a small pouch in the dish that contained different suspicious grease, but Gertrud explained that it was only tallow she had scraped off the Christmas candles. The court was satisfied with this explanation, but their careful examination shows they strongly believed matter could possess supernatural powers. The same belief was expressed on several occasions in the Bohuslän witch trials.

In the premodern worldview, matter was not necessarily thought a fixed, lifeless element; in fact, its characteristic was that it was constantly subject to change. Neither was the boundary between dead and living matter as absolute as to modern minds. In the Middle Ages, sacred objects

G. Malmstedt, *Premodern Beliefs and Witch Trials in a Swedish Province, 1669–1672*, Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-76120-2_9

were considered to possess a special power and could even come alive in some senses, as when religious statues wept or sacramental bread bled.[1] With the Reformation, Protestants in principle distanced themselves from the idea that matter could have inherent sacred power. In the Lutheran Church, however, the question of the transubstantiation of the sacramental bread and wine in the Eucharist was unresolved, as Christ was considered to be physically present once the priest had recited the Words of Institution. As Terese Zachrisson shows in her study of materiality in post-Reformation Sweden, beliefs about the inherent holiness of matter lived on in popular religiosity long after the Reformation.[2]

Yet though opinion was divided on whether matter could possess sacred power, both priests and the laity seem to have been in full agreement that matter could obtain supernatural power by means of witchcraft. The reason for putting enchantments on objects could vary. There were a couple of Bohuslän trials where the court record shows it was considered a demonstration of the witch's remarkable ability, but in most circumstances, it was thought that enchanted objects were used to evil ends in *maleficium*. In this chapter, I will consider both approaches.

Dancing Milk Pails

The widow Malin Olsdotter, better known as Malin i Viken, was tried in Kungälv in 1669, because Ragnille cross-examined in Marstrand a couple of days before had accused her of witchcraft. The court exhorted Malin to confess, telling her to bear in mind she had long had a reputation for witchcraft and her mother had been burnt at the stake as a witch. Malin denied the allegations, but the court did not let up, deciding instead to imprison her and resume the hearing a few days later. When she came before them again, a letter from the court in Marstrand was read aloud which advised the Kungälv bench that Ragnille had accused Malin of being able to make 'milk pails dance all by themselves'.[3] Malin denied this too and refused when asked if she wanted to make the journey out to Marstrand to face her accusers.

However, it seems that the story of the dancing milk pails was known in several places in the area. A month or so later, when Malin was still in

[1] Bynum 2011, 52 *et passim*; Zachrisson 2017, 14–18.
[2] Zachrisson 2017, 263–71 *et passim*.
[3] *Rannsakningarna*, 9–14 July 1668, 53–4; VaLA, GHA 13 July 1669, fol. 149.

prison (but now on more serious charges), a witness from Hisingen, an island near Kungälv, came forward to say she had seen Malin's trick with the milk pails. The witness, Anna Andersdotter, said it had happened when she was working as a maid in Kungälv, and was on her way out to the fields for the evening milking. She saw how Malin 'made the milk pails dance so that one pail banged against the other, and the maids stood in a circle and watched'.[4] The strange goings-on had attracted several spectators, and according to Anna, it went on so long she and some of the other maids did not get back to town before the bridge was locked for the night. Another woman witnessed in court that she had heard the women saying Malin had made the milk pails dance, but she no longer remembered which women it was. Despite their testimony, Malin continued to deny everything.

In any case, Anna Andersdotter claimed that she had seen Malin conjure the pails with her own eyes, and the incident had caused a stir among the maids who were on their way out of town to the milking. This was probably the event Ragnille had in mind when she denounced Malin during the cross-examinations in Marstrand, which shows how far the story had spread. Malin was known for her witchcraft, as the court said as her first cross-examination began, and this story would have been one of the rumours shared among people in the area—and possibly, because Malin had made a show of her skill in an unambiguously female setting, mainly among women.

The Weather-Pipe

Per Matsson from Mollösund, the man accused of having a hand in the shipwreck, was well known for owning a pipe which he used to control the wind. The court record for the hearings in August 1669 states that 'Mollösund's fishermen' had denounced Per, because thirteen years earlier he had used a pipe to conjure up a wind when they were out at sea. The court asked Börta Crämars if she knew where Per had obtained the pipe, and she answered that it was probably given to him by his mother, Malin på Härön, and added she was sure that it was Malin who had taught him witchcraft.[5] That was the last of the weather-pipe in the court record for that hearing, but when the third Commission questioned Per Matsson

[4] *Rannsakningarna*, 61–2; VaLA, GHA 21 Sept. 1669, fols. 167–8.
[5] *Rannsakningarna*, 19 Aug. 1669, 100.

two years later, it was brought up again, and new details were added to the story.

An old man called Michael Larsson said when he and some children and Per Matsson were homeward bound after a fishing trip, the wind dropped and they were becalmed. He had told the children they would have to row home. Per, though, had said, 'We are sure to have a wind,' and blew a small green 'tobacco pipe'. A breeze came up, but as it did not fill the sails, Michael told the children to start rowing again. Per blew the pipe again, and on the third attempt, they got a wind strong enough to sail home. The children then wanted to take the pipe from Per, but he threw it into the sea. Michael admitted that he never saw Per use it to smoke tobacco.[6]

Anna Olufsdotter from Mollösund said much the same on oath. By her account the fishing trip had happened some twelve years earlier when she was 'half-grown', that Per had said, 'We are sure to have a wind,' and when he had blown his pipe the third time, 'there came much weather and a southerly wind', so they could sail home at full speed. Another witness then repeated the story, but she said she was a small child when it happened, and she recalled it as if it were a dream.[7]

When their testimony was later read back to Per, he confessed that the story was true and also that he did not smoke tobacco, confirming that it was not an ordinary pipe. He said his mother had put the pipe in his pocket and said, 'You are little, my son; when you are not able to row you can blow it and you will get a wind.' After he had thrown the pipe into the sea, he had gone mad and stayed in that state for several weeks. Börta Crämars and Anna Olufsdotter, however, said Per had been mad before that.[8]

When the third Commission later sentenced Per to death as a witch, his use of the weather-pipe was one of the stated reasons. The court noted in its verdict that Per had blown the pipe three times and, as if with the Devil's black arts, had conjured up a wind. The time elapsed since this episode had changed somewhat: according to the verdict, it occurred fifteen or sixteen years earlier.[9]

The story has something of a fairy-tale character, as every witness said Per blew his pipe three times and the wind increased each time. Over the years it had obviously taken root in local memory, and it is probable the

[6] *Rannsakningarna*, 228; RA, Kommissorialrätt 23 June 1671, fols. 13–14.
[7] *Rannsakningarna*, 228; RA, Kommissorialrätt 23 June 1671, fols. 13–14.
[8] *Rannsakningarna*, 228–9; RA, Kommissorialrätt 23 June 1671, fol. 14.
[9] *Rannsakningarna*, 8 July 1671, 255.

form of the story with its all-important three had been established when the story was recounted.

As all the witnesses testified on oath, they must have been convinced they were telling the truth. Judging by the court record, Per does not seem to have tried to deny the accusations, as he not only agreed with the testimony, but when he also admitted that he did not smoke, it was obvious he had had the pipe with him for other reasons. On closer inspection, though, it transpires that Per did not actually confess to having any magical ability: it was his mother who had given him the enchanted pipe. He probably thought it was a timely mitigation that he had thrown the pipe into the sea once it had revealed its power. Since his neighbours had denounced him at the hearing in Mollösund, they did not think him completely innocent, even though they agreed with Per that it was his mother who had enchanted the pipe; the fact that he had used the magic power at his disposal had made a lasting and probably disturbing impression on them. For the court, though, the matter was simple: it was the Devil's power that Per had harnessed to control the winds.

Charm Bags

The milk pails and weather-pipe are examples of how it was imagined that objects could take on life or power through witchcraft. In these cases, however, they did not pose a threat, unlike the enchanted objects used in *maleficium*. The commonest objects cited in witchcraft accusations well into the early modern period were various forms of *trollklutar* (charm bags) with their varying contents.[10] Charm bags naturally featured in the Bohuslän witch trials. At the hearings in Tanum, Gunill Toresdotterr was finally made to confess that she had put a curse on Olof Trondsson's wife with the help of a charm bag containing three pinches of soil from the churchyard and three grains of barley.

Charm bags were also mentioned in Marstrand in 1669, giving a glimpse of a world in which people lived in fear of being the subject of a surreptitious attack. The accusations in this particular case were serious, and the testimony detailed.

[10] See, for example, Sörlin 1993, 137. Bags of hair, fingernails, bones, and other magical objects were also common in trials in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. They were often hidden under thresholds and in byres (Ankarloo 1984, 47).

Marit Byskrivers had been accused by Ragnille of being a dangerous witch. When she appeared in court she denied all the charges and stressed she had never had a reputation for witchcraft. A town burgher called Gilbert Willumsen and his wife Margarete came forward to accuse Marit of having hidden a charm bag in the runnel under Gilbert's doorstep at nine o'clock in the evening on 9 April 1663.[11] Even though six years had passed, the date and time they gave was remarkably accurate. The couple also submitted written witnessed testimony from one of their maids. Gilbert had been away on the day in question, but Margarete said on oath that everything in their written submission was true. To further emphasise the veracity of her testimony, the court was told that when Margarete went in labour she swore to the midwife and the other women present that she was telling the truth. God had blessed her with the easiest birth she had ever experienced, as the midwife and the other women present could attest. This would have given considerable weight to Margarete's words.

She described her servants saying that night they had noticed Marit was digging about in the runnel under the doorstep. Margarete went out and asked what she was doing. When she went back into the house, her women told her they had seen Marit standing there for a long time, pouring water into the runnel to flush away whatever it was she had put under the doorstep. However, she had not succeeded in doing so, as the next morning one of Margarete's maids found a charm bag in the runnel. It was made of grey paper, sewn with 'stiches of new hemp yarn'. When they opened the bag, they found 'divers cloth, both nails and hair, and more'.[12]

The written witness account was far more detailed. Ragnele Andersdotter, who was one of Gilbert and Margarete's servants, described what she had seen and heard that evening. Another woman in the house had told her Marit was outside in the street, behaving oddly. The two women peered out through a chink in the door. Ragnele said she could see Marit

> standing on the aforesaid Gilbert Willumsen's doorstep and looking around in all directions up the way and down towards the hut. At that moment she got down on her knees and the one hand, while with the other hand she took something out from under her apron, and straightway pushed her arm as far as she could under Gilbert's aforementioned doorstep from the end

[11] *Rannsakningarna*, 9 July 1669, 35–6.
[12] *Rannsakningarna*, 35; VaLA, GHA 9 July 1669, fols. 18–19.

towards Maret Jörgen Carstens's house, and then she scraped up the earth with her hands.[13]

The women fetched Margarete, who immediately went out to ask what Marit was up to. She shouted, 'What are you doing under my doorstep at night? What was it you put under the doorstep?' Marit tried to mollify her and said she had only been looking for fish heads. Margarete then called for the maid, who said what she had seen, and added she had not thrown any fish heads into the runnel since the previous autumn. Margarete was convinced Malin was up to no good and suspected she was trying to take revenge for a past argument which was meant to be behind them—as she said to Malin, 'Have you not yet forgotten it?'—because 'You have been twice to the altar since', meaning they had both taken Eucharist on a couple of occasions since, and once shriven 'then all should be forgotten'.[14]According to Ragnele, Marit said she had heard that Margarete had called her husband a liar. Margarete replied that if so, it would have been true, because he had lied about her husband in front of everyone in the town hall. At this point Marit's son came out and told Margarete that if his father was a liar then she was a whore.[15] According to Ragnele, Marit tried to calm the situation, asking Margarete not to say anything because 'it is just talk'. They went their separate ways in silence. Judging by this testimony, the two women were already at odds and things were not made better by their behaviour in the street. Although Margarete said they found a charm bag the following morning, they do not seem to have gone to court at the time; only now, six years later, when Marit was on trial as a witch having been accused by others. The court believed the story, though, and when the Göta Court of Appeal later upheld the verdict against Marit Byskrivers, the charm bag was mentioned among the grounds for its decision.[16]

Marit's situation had not improved when the court heard a different witness who testified about a charm bag from many years before. The woman said that when she was a child, Marit had persuaded her to put a charm bag in the path of one of the town's priests. This was love magic: the reason for the pouch, according to the witness, was to make the priest

[13] VaLA, GHA DATE fols. 37–8; *Rannsakningarna*, 37 differs slightly.
[14] VaLA, GHA, DATE fol. 39; *Rannsakningarna*, 38.
[15] VaLA, GHA, DATE fol. 39; *Rannsakningarna*, 38.
[16] *Rannsakningarna*, 155.

reciprocate Marit's love. However, it all went wrong, as it was another of the town's priests who walked over the charm bag, and he was already married.[17]

It was never clear what this particular pouch contained, but in the other two were such things as consecrated earth, hair, and fingernails: all materials found frequently in magical contexts and considered to possess special powers.

Indoors and Out

It was known for people to be the target of witchcraft by enchanted objects of various kinds being hidden on their property. Kerstin i Lövri, for example, admitted that she and another woman had placed out a small yellow stick, three kinds of feathers, and three kinds of hair on the ground outside the farm that she had lost. They and the curse the women recited were designed to deprive the new owners of any happiness they might have had from it.

In another story, an animal horn was used in the same way. At Karin Joens's trial, Börta Pedersdotter accused her of having used magic to stop her from brewing. Börta told the court that when she had been on the island of Skaftö, a stranger had warned her about her neighbours who wanted to destroy her good fortune: according to the woman, one of Börta's neighbours had buried an animal horn on her property, and 'as long as it is there, you will have no luck'. Börta was convinced that Karin was the neighbour the woman had in mind. What is not clear, however, is whether Börta actually found a horn.[18]

Karin was also accused of having done harm to livestock belonging to a town burgher, Lars Philipsson, by placing an enchanted object in one of his outbuildings. Lars said for a while he had let Karin keep a calf in his byre. Later, he found that someone had dug a hole in one of the stalls for a glass container with 'a kind of matter in it which looked like molten pitch'.[19] He removed it and hid it away so he could ask his mother what it might be, but when he went to fetch it he found it was gone, and with it the pitch-like material. No one had been on the farm in the meantime and his servants were all indoors in the house: the container and its contents

[17] *Rannsakningarna*, 9 July 1669, 36.
[18] *Rannsakningarna*, 177.
[19] *Rannsakningarna*, 177; RA, Kommissorialrätt 6 July 1670, fol. 94.

had disappeared mysteriously. After that Lars began to lose livestock: two horses died, his calves never survived longer than eight days, and on one occasion he lost twenty-eight sheep. He put all his misfortunes down to Karin, and by implication the mysterious object he believed she had buried in the byre.[20]

In the Depths

On a couple of occasions, enchanted objects were said to have been placed in the sea to curse the area's fishing industry by scaring off the fish. During the first hearings in Marstrand, Ragnille accused Malin Ruths of having gone out with several other witches to 'put copper horses down for the fish and keep them away from land'.[21] The court asked Ragnille if anyone would catch fish as long as the copper horses remained, and she said no, but she added that if the witches she had denounced retrieved the horses, the fish would return. The copper horses were not mentioned in the court record after that, but the accusation did feature in the Göta Court of Appeal's verdict.[22]

According to Linderholm, copper horses dated back to a medieval legend described by the Norwegian priest Peder Claussøn Friis (1545–1614) in his description of Norway and its islands, *Norriges og omliggende Oers Beskrivelse*. Svenungsson too writes that in Norway in the fourteenth century, there were small weights in the form of animals including horses made of bronze, which later were thought to have magical powers.[23]

The belief that copper horses could scare away fish was also documented in the Danish witch trials. Jens Christian Johansen mentions in his study of witchcraft in the seventeenth century that on several occasions suspects from the Danish mainland, Jutland, confessed to putting a curse on local fishing. At a trial in 1611 in Norstrand, a number of them admitted they had put copper horses in the sea for that reason.[24] It is feasible that rumours of this earlier trial had reached Bohuslän, which was part of Denmark—Norway at that stage, but on the other hand, it cannot be excluded that both cases reflect older beliefs on both sides of the Skagerrak.

[20] *Rannsakningarna*, 193; RA, Kommissorialrätt 7 July 1671, fol. 83/5.

[21] *Rannsakningarna*, 7 Jan. 1671, 193–4; *Rannsakningarna*, 32–3; VaLA, GHA 8 July 1669, fol. 15.

[22] *Rannsakningarna*, 155.

[23] Linderholm 1918, 94; for Svenungsson's reasoning, see *Rannsakningar*, 33.

[24] Johansen 1991, 78.

Elin i Staxäng was also persuaded after long, brutal questioning to say how she had put a curse on the fishing. There was no mention of copper, but horses did figure in her story. Elin told the court how with Devil's help she had put hanks of horsehair into the sea and then bade 'the herring in the name of Satan to stay away from land', which had the desired effect on the fishing there.[25]

Enchanted Things

The power obtained through witchcraft varied in length. Dancing milk pails presumably held their enchantment for a limited time only, whereas the objects used for *maleficium* retained their dangerous properties for a long time or even permanently. That was the reasoning behind an animal horn hidden on someone's land to bring them misfortune or the objects which Kerstin and Ingeborg stuck into the ground just outside the croft Kerstin had been forced to quit.

In some cases, though, there was an innate magical power to the object or matter that did not require witchcraft to exist. This was true of some of the things found in charm bags: consecrated soil from a churchyard, for example. Proximity mattered too, as the charm bags mentioned in the court records appear to have been considered effective when the victims came near them. In general, charm bags were thought permanently dangerous, and so when discovered they were destroyed or removed as soon as possible, which meant few survived to be brought in evidence in court.[26]

Enchanted things were a source of general concern and fear. Unsurprisingly, it was objects thought to be designed to cause harm which evoked such feelings. However, Per Matsson's magical weather-pipe seems to have worried people too. While it had not caused any damage—if anything it benefited everyone in the boat—the story still lived on for years afterwards and was the ostensible reason why Per's neighbours denounced him for witchcraft. History does not say what people thought of the enchanted milk pails, but it would appear the sight astonished passers-by and held their attention so long they failed to reach home before the town bridge was closed for the night.

All the enchanted objects designed to do harm had one thing in common: they were hidden and thus were intended to do their evil in secret.

[25] *Rannsakningarna*, 185; RA, Kommissorialrätt 29 Nov. 1670, fols. 43–4.
[26] Sörlin 1993, 137.

Hence, Marit's charm bag pushed under the doorstep; hence, the objects buried on victims' land or in outbuildings; hence, the objects dropped into the sea. The charm bags hid the substance of the magic yet further, but equally it could have been to keep several magically active ingredients together. The fact they were hidden is testimony to the fact they were thought powerful and dangerous: the witch had to hide them to prevent them being removed before the full effect was achieved. This was hidden evil in a very literal sense, but even at the general level, it was a source of constant concern. Holy Communion could be a reassurance, as we have seen, but as the conflict between Marit and Margarete demonstrated, even that ritual was not a complete guarantee against malice.

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PART IV

Supernatural Powers

CHAPTER 10

God's Children

When Gertrud from Mollösund put her head on the executioner's block, she cried out that the priest who had helped question her would have to face her and God's stern judgement. Her final words are one of many examples of how people accused of being witches invoked God. The witch trials played out in a premodern culture that was largely determined by religion and where belief in God was universal. In the literature about Europe's witch-hunts, though, the focus is the Devil. God is generally relegated to the background, and the strength of people's faith is only on display in the witch-hunters' battle against their idea of God's enemies. With a few exceptions, we do not know much about what God meant to suspects.[1]

God was in fact mentioned often during the hearings. We have already seen that his name and words had a special power, which was used in charms and in encounters with evil powers (see Chap. 7). A couple of instances show that it was normal for God's name to feature in greetings and in toasts. One witness said in passing that when she met two men who were working on a fence, she began the conversation with 'God bless your

[1] Östling 2002, 39, however, notes in his study of Blåkulla and witch trials that defendants sometimes used what he describes as religious rhetoric. He notes that a couple of defendants prayed in court that God would confirm the truth of their case, while during proceedings priests sometimes called on God to reveal the truth. In the literature on witch-hunts against healers and white magic, on the other hand, the accused's faith in God is often mentioned. See, for example, Oja 1999.

G. Malmstedt, *Premodern Beliefs and Witch Trials in a Swedish Province, 1669–1672*, Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-76120-2_10

work', suggesting that good manners called for this kind of polite greeting.[2] Judging by different testimony, when people raised a toast they might say 'Gud finnes!', 'God exists!' Kerstin i Lövri said when the witches drank together, they did not say 'God exists!', but instead 'Now I drink from my stoup, the Devil will give me all I need'.[3] The story suggests it was customary to say 'God exists!' and the like when drinking a toast; the witches' toast thus marked them out as the complete opposite.

When God was mentioned in the hearings, it was often when the accused invoked his name in one of several ways. Commonest of all was God, but Jesus and Christ also appeared relatively frequently, and at one point, a suspect spoke of 'Christ crucified'. In this chapter, I will chart the circumstances under which God featured in the Bohuslän court records, and what the defendants' image of God seems to have been.

The Stern Judge

It was not only Gertrud who warned her accusers of God's righteous judgement. Similar statements were made on several occasions during the hearings. During cross-examination, defendants often told the members of the court that they were accountable to God and that if they unjustly tortured and punished the innocent, they would be held accountable for their actions in time. Gertrud had said as much during her first appearance in court. She flatly denied all the accusations and added, 'but now you have me in your hands, do with me now as you will answer to me and God's stern judgement'. Towards the end of the same cross-examination, she said again that the court would have to answer before God for how they treated her.[4] At the hearings about the fishing boat from Mollösund, both Per Larsson and his daughter Anna expressed the same view: having refuted all the accusations against him, Per announced that those who judged would 'meet him and God's stern judgement'.[5] Anna lumped together the members of the court and those who had falsely accused her and told them all they would face her and God's stern judgement, and 'those who do this to her will never come to God's kingdom'.[6]

[2] *Rannsakningarna*, 265; RA, Kommissorialrätt 6 Sept. 1671, fol. 3/195.
[3] *Rannsakningarna*, 268; RA, Kommissorialrätt 8 Sept. 1671, fol. 6/198.
[4] *Rannsakningarna*, 104–105; VaLA, GHA 20 Aug. 1669, fols. 254–5.
[5] *Rannsakningarna*, 132; VaLA, GHA 26 Oct. 1669, fol. 215.
[6] *Rannsakningarna*, 138; VaLA, GHA 28 Oct. 1669, fol. 224.

At the hearings in Tega, Elin i Staxäng warned that God would avenge the court's ill treatment of an innocent person. Her husband Iver pointed the finger at the deputy lawman who presided over the hearings, saying God's stern judgement would fall on him for treating Iver so unjustly.[7] At another trial, it was the priests who were threatened with God's judgement. Ingeborg i Bodilsröd in north Bohuslän refused to confess to anything, and the court therefore decided she should be taken with the other condemned people to the stake as if she also were going to be executed. They thought she would crumple and make a confession. Mock executions were a tactic tried in other cases too, but as mentioned earlier, it was never successful. The court records note that when the priests went to talk to Ingeborg, 'she said evil words, and said that one day they would answer for taking her innocent blood'. It was implied that the higher power they would have to answer to was God.[8]

In some cases, suspects saved their direst warnings of God's judgement for their accusers. When Karin Joens was tried in Uddevalla, a town burgher called Lars Philipsson accused her of being behind several serious accidents and misfortunes he had suffered. Karin said she was innocent and that 'Lars Philipsson would answer before God for laying the blame on her'. When the court threatened to fetch the executioner to torture her if she did not confess voluntarily, she answered they could do as they pleased, but they 'would have to answer for it before God another day'.[9]

Gertrud was not the only one who at the point of death warned her persecutors they would meet again before God in judgement. Tormod Nilsson denounced Kerstin, the daughter of Sven Snickare from Marstrand, as a witch, and during her cross-examination, she said he would have to answer to God for it.[10] She said it again at her execution: she protested her innocence and said that 'Tormod Nilsson in Marstrand would by Easter face her before God's stern judgement or at the gates of Hell, because he was the first to denounce her for witchcraft'. At the same mass execution, Ragnela i Lysbro warned the chief district judge Petter Drachman that he would face her and 'God's stern judgement', again by Easter.[11]

[7] *Rannsakningarna*, 25 Nov. 1670, 180.
[8] *Rannsakningarna*, 17 Jan. 1672, 321.
[9] *Rannsakningarna*, 194; RA, Kommissorialrätt 7 Jan. 1671, fol. 6.
[10] *Rannsakningarna*, 1 July 1671, 240.
[11] *Rannsakningarna*, 27 Jan. 1672, 324. Easter Sunday that year was on 7 April. Nilsson and Drachman were thus predicting an imminent death.

The defendants' constant references to God's judgement might have been empty rhetoric, used in a desperate attempt to persuade the court to recognise their innocence, yet instead, the impression is one of a certainty of belief when all hope of acquittal was gone and they were facing death. The warnings of God's judgement were not only a rhetorical device, but were an expression of the accused's very real hopes that God would ultimately set everything to rights.

It was essentially the same at all the hearings. Independently of one another, all the defendants imagined that God would sit in judgement after their deaths, and the unrighteous would be forced to face their victims in a real trial. They also said God would be stern, turning sinners away from the kingdom of heaven. Some seem to have supposed this would take place the moment everyone involved was dead, but that deviated from the official doctrine, as the Church taught that everyone's fate would be sealed on Judgement Day and not before.

An Omniscient and Merciful God

The defendants' hopes for exoneration after death, and punishment for those who bore false witness against them and for their judges, testify to their belief that God saw everything and knew everything. It can also be glimpsed at other times during the trials. When the court bullied Gertrud Corporals into admitting she had acted in the Devil's name, she cried out resignedly, 'It may well be so' and prayed to God 'from whom no thoughts are hidden, to be merciful and forgive her this and her other sins'.[12] This concerned the charge that Gertrud had helped Anna Persdotter give birth and had named the newborn. Gertrud had done this by spitting beer in the child's mouth and saying, 'Welcome, Kirstin Sörens.' This was the baby's grandmother's name, and because she, like Gertrud, was accused of witchcraft and because the baby had been named in a way that the court believed resembled witchcraft, they were convinced little Kerstin had been incorporated into the Devil's kingdom and not the kingdom of heaven. Gertrud did not think so, and her statement that 'no thoughts are hidden' seems to point to her certainty that God at least knew what she had been thinking when she named the baby.

There were times defendants said in court that God or 'Christ crucified' would acquit them on all charges of witchcraft, or they defended

[12] *Rannsakningarna*, 144; VaLA, GHA 28 Oct. 1669, fols. 233–4.

themselves with phrases such as 'God knows' and 'My God, my Jesus knows'.[13] They were to an extent rhetorical, of course, but we cannot rule out that people sincerely believed that God knew everything and thus would free them from false accusations, even if it might be in the next world.

In some of what the defendants said in court, there was an omniscient God who was gentler and more understanding than the clergy and judges in the room. This was evident in the statements made by Per Larsson from Mollösund noted in the court record. Per had been unusually resolute during questioning, and it seems he was not afraid to speak his mind, as the clerk noted irritatedly in the record. He was tortured into admitting to most of the charges against him, but the very next day he recanted and said he had not done anything wrong, nor had he been in league with the Devil.[14] When his confession was read aloud, he said he had not meant any of it—that there was no truth to what he had been forced to confess. The vicar then interrupted to warn Per not to say such things and to repent his manifest sins, but according to the court record, Per 'would not yield, but said he could indeed defend what he had done; when he prays to God, he is forgiven'.[15] It made no difference what the vicar and the court said, Per did not waver and answered them 'very contemptuously', which ended with him being removed from the courthouse.

Per's conduct gives the distinct impression that he was convinced God was all-knowing and merciful. When he was cross-examined again the following day, he stood his ground. The court record stated that he was unrepentant, 'saying he had done no more harm than he could defend before God, and he uttered divers vile shameful words'.[16] The vicar then led the court in prayer to God that the Devil would be driven out of the lost sinner. This interruption over, Per said that he now stood by his earlier confession and that he had joined in the sinking of Thomas Andersson's fishing boat, but as we have seen (Chap. **3**), the court decided there was not a shred of remorse in his confession. When the vicar again admonished him to repent his sins and pray to God for forgiveness, Per replied that 'God will surely forgive him' and then 'insulted' him.[17]

[13] See, for example, *Rannsakningarna*, 32–3, 89, 115.
[14] *Rannsakningarna*, 140; VaLA, GHA 28 Oct. 1669, fol. 227.
[15] *Rannsakningarna*, 140; VaLA, GHA 28 Oct. 1669, fol. 227.
[16] *Rannsakningarna*, 145; VaLA, GHA 29 Oct. 1669, fol. 236.
[17] *Rannsakningarna*, 145; VaLA, GHA 29 Oct. 1669, fol. 236.

Per did not consider himself free of sin. In an earlier cross-examination, he said 'he regretted everything in his lifetime he had done against God', a remark which shows he was convinced God knew everything that happened.[18] Yet he does not seem to have believed his sins so great that God could not forgive him. His was a kinder, more forgiving God than the stern figure who loomed in the clergy's teachings.[19]

Divine Intervention

Judging by what defendants said in court, they do not seem to have expected God to intervene in proceedings and save them from torture and death. It was unusual, at least in the Bohuslän court records, for anyone to claim that God would prove they were telling the truth. Anna Persdotter from Mollösund was that rare exception. After proclaiming her innocence, she said, 'God himself would come down and answer for her and fashion stones which would attest to her innocence.'[20] The court refused to be moved by her impassioned words and pushed ahead in order to force her to confess.

Of course, we cannot know what the accused actually thought or what they said in their lonely prayers to God, but with the exception of Anna's words, there is nothing about their remarks or behaviour in the court records that suggests they hoped for divine intervention. By all accounts, their hope was that God would do justice in the next world, not in this.

Among the priests who took part in the witch trials, however, there seems to have been a belief that God could intervene. It would explain the vicar's interruption of the cross-examination of Per Larsson. At first his prayers were answered when Per reaffirmed the confession he had just recanted, but the court soon realised it was in word only and Per had not had a change of heart.

On several occasions, the priests in court were moved to prayer in order to persuade suspects to confess. When Malin i Viken was cross-examined in Kungälv, the priest present prayed aloud that God would drive the Devil out of her 'and open her mouth in a true and good confession'. It seemed

[18] *Rannsakningarna*, 139; VaLA, GHA 28 Oct. 1669, fol. 227.

[19] In the seventeenth century, there were repeated warnings in the official proclamations about God's wrath and the severe punishments that awaited the sinful (Malmstedt 1994, 195–6, 199–203).

[20] *Rannsakningarna*, 137; VaLA, GHA 27 Oct. 1669, fol. 223.

to have the desired effect when Malin confessed what the court wanted to hear, but soon after she was again being described as obdurate and recalcitrant.[21]

During the interrogations with the accused from Mollösund, the vicar present at the hearings resorted to prayer on several occasions. When Gertrud Corporals said they had eaten meal 'in the name of God', he led the court in praying to God to help the deluded defendants to confess—a successful method, apparently, because Gertrud immediately admitted that the Devil had been at the meal.[22] When Börta Crämars was cross-examined, the vicar again led the court in a prayer that God would cast out the Devil and persuade her to truly confess.[23] There were public prayers during Karin Joens's cross-examination in Uddevalla and the third Commission's hearings in Kungälv in 1671; indeed, when several of the defendants there were thought overly reluctant to confess, there were prayers in church and elsewhere, and not just in court, that they would repent. According to the court record, 'one saw in very that moment that the Lord God touched their hearts. For Ragnela i Lysbro … first went to confession.'[24]

Prayer was evidently thought successful at times, but the effect often turned out to be short-lived when suspect after suspect recanted not long after. Where it did have an effect, it may have because defendants respected the priests and the word of God, while public prayer brought strong psychological pressure to bear on the individual. It is also possible that prayer gave defendants the impression there were mitigating circumstances—Gertrud's confession about the meal with the Devil could be understood as an example, if so. All the talk from the bench of people being 'deluded' may have raised the defendants' hopes of leniency, as it would suggest that they too were victims. Certainly, one of the accused said that by rights she should be forgiven by the court, because she had been inveigled into communing with the Devil.[25]

[21] *Rannsakningarna*, 2 Nov. 1669, 81–2.

[22] *Rannsakningarna*, 25 Oct. 1669, 126–7.

[23] *Rannsakningarna*, 26 Oct. 1669, 131.

[24] *Rannsakningarna*, 225; RA, Kommissorialrätt 22 June 1671, fol. 9. For the hearing in Uddevalla, see *Rannsakningarna*, 197.

[25] See Börta Sunnerborg's statement when cross-examined in Kungälv, *Rannsakningarna*, 21 Oct. 1669, 75.

God in the Court Records

There were common strands in the defendants' testimony which reveal something of what they thought of God and his relationship with people and the world, at least as far as it went during their cross-examinations.

Some of what they said sounds contrived, though, as if they wanted to appear as good, God-fearing Christians. Most likely, these statements did not always reflect their actual beliefs. It is doubtful whether Gertrud Simon Madtses in Kungälv was sincere when she said of her husband's illness that 'God who sent it to him also gave him his health back'.[26] She said he had regained his health after they had visited the church in Grinneröd and left a votive offering of three shillings. This did not tally with what another defendant had already told the court about Gertrud, that when her husband fell ill she sent for a woman from Hisingen to cure him.[27] When people called in a wise woman, it was a sign they did not think the sickness came from God, but rather it had been caused by witchcraft or some evil spirit of disease. Even then there were few who were content to attribute diseases and cures solely to God's will: the usual thing was to look for explanations and a variety of remedies. It is possible that Gertrud and her husband had taken a belt and braces approach by both hiring a wise woman and making a votive offering in an especially propitious church and that they decided it was the latter that had cured him. Whatever the case, they do not seem to have relied solely on divine providence.

Most of what the court records have being said about God should not be dismissed as false piety or opportunism designed to make a good impression on the court, especially as in several instances it was said once there was no hope of changing the court's mind. In fact, it was generally consistent with a belief in an omniscient God, who was watching but from a distance, and who did not intervene in the fate of individuals. However, from other sources we know it was widely believed that God could and would intervene to punish peoples and nations for breaking the covenants and God's law. It was a question of the collective's contractual relationship with God; whether there was a general belief that God would not interfere human affairs was less clear, but that is certainly the picture the defendants

[26] *Rannsakningarna*, 20 Sept. 1669, 61.
[27] *Rannsakningarna*, 12 Sept. 1669, 59.

gave.[28] Other sources show that people who were sick or in distress turned to God for help, however, often propitiating him by votive offerings of various kinds.[29]

Even if God did not always intervene against the unrighteous in this world, everyone would be held accountable in the next. This was a God as the fair judge who treated everyone equally. Those who did someone an injustice would have to face their victims sooner or later. Even sinners among the spiritual or secular elite could thus be denied entry into the kingdom of heaven. God would forgive minor sins and transgressions, and so appeared both fair and merciful.

In the role of the righteous judge, though, God appeared as an exalted king far more than a father. He could not be expected to protect everyone in this world, but he would eventually see justice done the day of reckoning came in the next. On some occasions, the father figure was also evoked, as when two suspects described themselves as children of God. When Malin Ruths was handed over to the executioner to be tortured, no matter how hard he tightened his screws on her fingers and arms she shouted that 'She is a child of God', and that she could not confess to anything or lie to herself. Afterwards, she answered 'to every question put to her that she is a child of God'.[30] This had several layers of meaning. For Malin, above all, it was her way of saying she was both devout and as innocent as a child. Yet, at the same time, it invoked God the Father, the supreme father figure, and perhaps also the idea that whoever hurt his children would one day pay for it.

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[28] Malmstedt 1994, 193–6.

[29] Weikert 2004, 31–4, 140–50, 222–26.; Zachrisson 2017, 77–82, 200–203, 274–76.

[30] *Rannsakningarna,* 167; RA, Kommissorialrätt 23 Apr. 1670, fol. 137; *Rannsakningarna*, 169; RA, Kommissorialrätt 26 Apr. 1670, fol. 140.

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CHAPTER 11

In the Clutches of Satan

When Per Larsson told the court that his confessions were untrue and insisted that he had done no harm and that God would forgive him, the court record noted that the bench were angered by 'how much this poor man was caught in the clutches of Satan'.[1] Per, though, put his faith in God, as we have seen. As far as the court was concerned, the Devil was ever-present: it was he who controlled all the witches, and the fundamental and most dangerous crime the hearings were designed to uncover was the pact with the Devil.

In the premodern worldview, there were other ways of associating with the Devil: things were not limited to pacts. Over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, several people in Sweden were put on trial for *djävulsförskrivning*, or Faustian bargains with the Devil, surrendering body and soul in return for wealth, invulnerability, and other personal benefits. Of the twenty-nine cases over two centuries studied by Soili-Maria Olli in her work on blasphemy, all the accused were men and were generally young and from urban backgrounds with a certain level of education that included literacy.[2] In contrast to the witches' secret or 'silent' pacts, such bargains were usually more open, and in several cases,

[1] *Rannsakningarna*, 140; VaLA, GHA 28 Oct. 1669, fol. 228.

[2] Olli 2007, 34–7, 132, 160–1. For cases studied by other researchers with the same pattern, see Sörlin 1993, 30–1; Oja 1999, 141–4.

G. Malmstedt, *Premodern Beliefs and Witch Trials in a Swedish Province, 1669–1672*, Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-76120-2_11

there was hard evidence in the shape of written contracts drawn up by the suspects. In addition, such undertakings were primarily considered a danger to the individual who made the bargain with the Devil, unlike secret pacts entered into by witches in order to do harm to all of Christendom.[3]

At the Bohuslän trials, no such bargains were ever found. Judging by the court records, the Devil did not play much of a role in the popular worldview and his significance for witchcraft seems to have been small. It is for that reason the Devil has not featured in the discussion of perceptions of reality in earlier chapters: the plain fact is that he was not mentioned in local accusations, made by those who considered themselves the victims of witchcraft. With a handful of exceptions, witnesses and defendants did not mention him. This has not gone unnoticed by other historians. Sörlin, in his study of witchcraft cases heard by the Göta Court of Appeal, notes that few accusations from local communities even hinted that witches were associated with the Devil, although he makes the point that the nature of the accusations does not allow definite conclusions about how the general populace viewed the Devil's role for witchcraft.[4] Judging by the international research, however, the Church's view that magic and witchcraft went hand in hand with the Devil does not seem to have been widely accepted in popular culture in early modern Europe. In time, the elite succeeded in satanising magic somewhat, but according to some historians, when the Church later stopped paying much heed to witchcraft, its association with the Devil was weakened, suggesting it was not especially deep-rooted to begin with.[5]

Confessions About the Devil

In the Bohuslän witch trials, the Devil primarily featured in the defendants' confessions. With few exceptions, though, this was only after aggressive questioning and frequently only after the defendant had been tortured by the public executioner on the court's orders. The court record is entirely open that they were forced confessions. They usually followed a standard pattern: the defendant was pressured into admitting they had made a deal with the Devil, whereupon the court browbeat them, often

[3] Olli 2007, 150–1.

[4] Sörlin 1993, 140.

[5] Bever 2013, 57. Oja 2005 325–7 discusses the association of magic with the Devil in Swedish folklore material.

with leading questions, into linking the existence of the pact with a meal eaten by the defendant in the Devil's name or even in his presence. In several instances, suspects said they had been entered in the Devil's book of names in their own blood. The court also badgered them into revealing all about the witches' sabbats and festivities, where the Devil gathered the witches in the area. At a late stage in the trials, there were a number of women who confessed to fornicating with the Devil, and in a couple of cases of giving birth to his progeny. Pacts, sabbats, consorting with the Devil: all were well-established elements in the official picture of witchcraft in late medieval and early modern Europe, and it is evident that the Bohuslän courts used every means possible to obtain confessions that followed the pattern.

During the first trials defendants often said nothing about the Devil until the very end, and in some cases not even then. At the hearings in Kungälv in 1669, it took over a month for the court to coerce Malin i Viken into saying she had done the Devil's bidding, and it was not until November of that year, after she had been tortured on several occasions, that she admitted to most of the stereotypes.[6] Later in the witch-hunt, and especially at the highly pressured hearings in north Bohuslän, confessions about pacts with the Devil were often made at a considerably earlier stage. For example, in 1671 the court under Feman's leadership took only three days to terrorise four women in Tanum into admitting they were in league with the Devil, and in Kvistrum, a few days later, four more women were forced to make similar confessions in short order. The speed of the admissions undeniably resulted from the brutality of the hearings in north Bohuslän, where the court resorted to ordeal by water and repeated torture within the first days of cross-examining suspects.[7]

The stories which defendants told about the Devil were literally beaten out of them, often under torture, and followed a standard pattern, and thus say more about the court's ideas than what popular beliefs might have been. However, the court records offer, alongside the official line peddled by the Church and the authorities, a few glimpses of the locals' views about the Devil.

[6] *Rannsakningarna*, 2 Nov. 1669, 81–7. Malin, however, had already been forced to confess on 19 August that she was a witch and that her name was written in Satan's book (*Rannsakningarna*, 56). She then retracted her confession and protested her innocence in all subsequent interrogations until November.

[7] For proceedings in Hede (now Tanumshede), see *Rannsakningarna*, 14–16 Sept. 1671, 284–300; for proceedings in Kvistrum, see *Rannsakningarna*, 18–19 Sept. 1671, 273–9.

Common Beliefs

The fact that the Devil was rarely named in court should not be taken to mean there was no connection between him and witchcraft in the popular mind. Maledictions, after all, often included an invocation of the Devil by name, usually Skam or Fan. It is unclear whether the effect was to imbue the malediction with the power of the Devil or whether it was mainly about creating a frightening impression. In both cases, though, the popular worldview associated witchcraft with the Devil, even though his active participation was not considered essential, and witches in general were not thought to serve him.

One reason for the Devil's absence from the Bohuslän testimony was that local accusations almost always concerned *maleficium*, and his part in that sort of crime was unclear. In other parts of Sweden, where child abduction and Blåkulla were almost obligatory, the Devil played a key role in accusations and testimony: there too his image differed from the official teachings, at least before the witch-hunt broke out and at the first trials. Birgitta Lagerlöf-Génetay claims that several stories about the Devil and Blåkulla from the first years seem almost good-natured and innocent. In the children's testimony, the Devil was more often than not a gentleman in fine clothes who laughed at people's mishaps and was even playful at times. Lagerlöf-Génetay suggests that the stories took a darker turn once the influence of priests and judges was brought to bear, with more frightening and cruel accounts of both Blåkulla and the Devil; other historians note that the Devil probably appeared less powerful, less terrifying, in the popular worldview than in the Church's teaching, let alone among dedicated witch-hunters.[8] In the oral tradition, the Devil was certainly dangerous, but at the same time he was not invincible: he could be outwitted and even exploited. He also appeared in funny stories, where he came off worst in encounters with cunning people.[9] This was the picture of the Devil found in folklore and primarily testified to beliefs from the nineteenth century, but which may well reflect older perceptions. These were stories of the Devil as a trickster—a cunning anti-hero of the kind found in many ballads and fables.[10]

[8] Lagerlöf-Génetay 1990, 144–7.
[9] Bever 2013, 57; Wall 1992, 32.
[10] Wolf-Knuts 1991, 282–7.

The Limited Power of the Devil

One of the few witness accounts from Bohuslän to mention the Devil, or possibly one of his familiars, implies there was a popular belief that his powers were limited. Anna Nielsdotter from Mollösund testified that she had seen a goat-like creature with flaming eyes in Per Larsson's boathouse.[11] It could have been the Devil himself, or perhaps one of his demons: either way, according to Anna the creature was sitting in a barrel, bleeding from its neck. Protecting herself by reciting God's word, Anna looked around the shed and discovered Per Larsson's wife, a known witch, crouching behind the door with her left hand behind her back. Although the court record did not spell it out, Anna believed she had caught Per Larsson's wife red-handed flogging the Devil or one of his demons. The whimpering she had heard coming from the boathouse, which she had gone to investigate, was supposedly the Devil in torment, and Per Larsson's wife was hiding her left hand behind her back to hide a cane or a whip. That is what the court took it to mean, as emerged later when Per Larsson was questioned. He was accused of keeping company with witches, and his wife's witchcraft was so strong 'that she could flog Satan, as Anna Nielsdotter had witnessed'.[12] There can be no doubt from this episode that people could believe the Devil's power had its limits. The fact that Anna overcame her fear with the help of God's word shows that the evil forces were not thought invincible, however frightening the situation.

A similar story was told during a Danish witch trial a few decades earlier. Three witches were said to have beaten one of the Devil's familiars with switch: the demon had taken the form of a cat, and the witches beat because they wanted him to put a curse on a man on their behalf.[13]

Familiars or demons were mentioned on a few occasions in Bohuslän by defendants forced to provide the details of their pacts with the Devil. They said time and again that it was part of the bargain to be given a familiar, which assisted them in various ways. Interaction with the forces of evil occasionally seemed positively mundane, which contributes to the general impression that, in the popular view, the Devil and his demons did not always appear utterly terrifying. Börta Sunnerborg from Kungälv told the

[11] *Rannsakningarna*, 117; VaLA, GHA 22 Sept. 1669, fols. 268–9.

[12] *Rannsakningarna*, 133–4; VaLA, GHA 27 Oct. 1669, fol. 217.

[13] Johansen 1987, 310. Tales about people whipping little devils seem to have been told in various parts of Europe in this period (Hagen 2003, 192).

court that Malin i Viken used her familiar to send for Börta.[14] Even the Devil himself was not above everyday chores: according to Börta, Satan used to 'spin the distaff' for Karin Sköttes when she was spinning.[15]

The image of the Devil in the popular worldview appears complex. The fact he was named in maledictions indicates that he was generally assumed to strike fear into people's hearts. It was also underlined by the witnesses' and defendants' use of Skam, Fan, Tramen, and Packer to refer to the Devil, all of them synonyms used as noa-names to avoid summoning him by mistake by speaking his real name. The fact that people believed the Devil could also change shape and appear as various animals will have intensified their fears. The Devil was an ever-present menace who could creep up on humans in the form of a stray dog, a cat, or any other animal ubiquitous in everyone's normal daily lives. His very real presence was what set the Devil apart, as God worked in the world without manifesting himself in physical form.

The Devil frightened people, but the Bohuslän testimony suggests that he was far from being the terrifying and omnipotent Prince of Darkness which the Church threatened them with. Further, the Devil's exact connections with witchcraft were unclear even then. Witchcraft, as we have seen, was probably thought of as an innate ability or a secret art that could be acquired without the help of the Devil. That was what Börta Crämars was really saying when she readily acknowledged that she had entered into a pact with the Devil. She announced, seemingly without coercion, that she had served the Devil for many years, but she also said he had no part in her witchery. Witchcraft was something she had learnt from other witches.[16]

[14] *Rannsakningarna*, 4 Nov. 1669, 88.

[15] *Rannsakningarna*, 79; VaLA, GHA 22 Oct. 1669, fol. 119. Karin initially denied it, but under pressure later admitted the Devil had probably helped her spin. Stories of witches who used the Devil as a servant also appeared in Danish trials from the early seventeenth century, see Kallestrup 2015, 146.

[16] *Rannsakningarna*, 106; VaLA, GHA 21 Aug. 1669, fol. 258. When asked who had taught her witchcraft, she replied, 'People talked and taught me.'

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CHAPTER 12

Concluding Discussion: An Enchanted World

The Bohuslän trials were held in a world which is well described as enchanted. In truth, the people of the premodern age arguably lived in several worlds at once; that in addition to the visible world there were other dimensions where supernatural powers, demons, spirits, and other beings moved, invisible to the human eye. Perceptions of reality were determined by the supernatural dimension to life. It was the belief in unearthly forces which also underpinned the tendency to explain the courses life took and all the unexpected and seemingly random events that happened along the way.

However widely held the beliefs about the nature of reality were at the time, though, there were also important differences between group attitudes to certain phenomena. We can assume, for example, that there was a dividing line between those who were literate, especially if they spoke more than one language, and the rest of the population: the literate were able to engage with international written culture, over and above the oral culture of which everyone was part. This paved the way for different attitudes on a variety of issues, as was clear when it came to views about witchcraft. Fear of the witches united everyone, though, whether scholars or laity. It was not something they were pressured into by the authorities: it was a fear that long predated the witch trials and would long survive them. Where opinion was divided was on how to meet the threat posed by

G. Malmstedt, *Premodern Beliefs and Witch Trials in a Swedish Province, 1669–1672*, Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-76120-2_12

witches, and ultimately what that threat was, as was apparent at the witch trials.

Given that this book is based on the statements made by defendants in court, of whom the vast majority were women, it could be argued the worldview discussed here is in fact a female worldview. However, as the question concerns basic beliefs about reality, it is unlikely there were gendered differences per se. Moreover, there was nothing about what the male defendants and witnesses said to suggest they perceived the world any differently. Both men and women who appeared in court spoke about shape-shifting, the power of words, objects charged with magical power, and God the omniscient and merciful.[1]

If such beliefs, whether open or secret, were widespread, perhaps there were gender differences in how and when magical powers could be used. In the literature, for example, it is suggested there were differences between men's and women's perceptions of the Devil, but because he played an almost non-existent role in the local testimony, there is no call for such conclusions here.[2] Further, there can be no doubt that both men and women considered the Devil a significant factor in life. The idea that the world was enchanted was universal, shared by all, scholars and laity, men and women, young and old.[3]

In this concluding chapter, I will revisit the most important stages of the Bohuslän witch trials, before asking what can be said about the premodern worldview, with its beliefs in supernatural powers and magical forces, its various dimensions of reality, and the primacy it supposedly gave to fear.

The Bohuslän Witch Trials

The violent witch-hunts that hit Bohuslän and other regions of Sweden in the space of just a few years were thought of by their instigators as extraordinary measures, taken against real threats which were a permanent feature of premodern life. The idea that some people possessed magical

[1] In the case of supernatural experiences in dreams, however, while the discussion is based on women's testimony, it is unlikely that perceptions of the boundaries between dream and reality are specifically female. There may have been differences between scholarly and popular opinion, however.

[2] Olli 2007, 156–7.

[3] It is possible there were different views on supernatural forces and gender differences in how and when these forces were used.

powers, which could be used for good or evil, was very ancient and would live on for a long time as a popular belief. People had been accused, convicted, and even executed for witchcraft in previous centuries. These new trials, though, were far-reaching and systematic in a way never seen before.[4]

The Bohuslän trials began with a single court case, which within a matter of weeks spiralled into a wholesale hunt. In this, the province followed the general pattern of European witch trials, although with a lower death toll than most. There were several reasons for the trials' progress. At an early stage, the town court in Marstrand had reason to suspect that Anna i Holta was not the only witch in the town, and when their suspicions were confirmed by Ragnille Jens Svenses's confessions, the case gained momentum. The court informed the provincial governor of Bohuslän, Harald Stake, of the ominous turn of events, and he in turn informed central government and ordered various commanders in the province to arrest and investigate suspects.

A decisive factor in how things developed was the local elite's acceptance of the continental stereotypes about witches. Local officials, judges, members of the various courts, and several priests apparently shared the view that all witches were in the service of the Devil and drew their power from him. They were certain that, as the scholarly tradition had it, the Devil gathered them all for witches' sabbats and other festivities, which meant that all his followers knew one another. This belief led court after court to pressurise defendants into denouncing other witches in the area. With the coercive means at their disposal in the form of ordeal by water and torture, courts were also able to obtain the confessions they wanted, which meant the trials tended to be self-perpetuating.

The local elite would have known of the dramatic cases of witchcraft surfacing elsewhere in the country, and it may well have led to a harshening of attitudes. Matters were not helped by the fact that Bohuslän was a very recent conquest. It was important for the provincial governor and central government to take the warning signs very seriously in order to signal the new authorities' sense of responsibility by stamping out witchcraft.[5] The regents' letter to Stake stressed how important it was that the

[4] Between 1619 and 1625, the number of witchcraft cases in Denmark and Norway soared, and it is possible the executions mentioned in the later hearings took place in that period (see Hagen 2013, 386).

[5] Sörlin 2006a, 135, suggests that the authorities may have overreacted because the province had only recently been incorporated into the kingdom.

king's subjects saw that the authorities were monitoring their spiritual and worldly welfare.

The judicial system, in the shape of the local courts, individual lawyers, the Göta Court of Appeal, and the local priests on the bench, was the strongest driving force. It has been noted that unlike the rest of Sweden, the Bohuslän trials were largely engineered by the courts themselves and the local authorities. It has also been said that there was not much in the way of popular support, in contrast to, say, Dalarna and Norrland. This is borne out by the way in which suspects were identified and brought before the courts. Witch trials in Bohuslän had a different character, too. Local accusations concerned only traditional witchcraft, and especially various forms of *maleficium*. Neither the Devil nor Blåkulla played a significant role. There is also no sign that the scholarly stereotype, with its pacts with the Devil and collective conspiracies against society, had any traction in local communities in this part of the country. Attacks by witches seem to have been thought some sort of personal revenge. Judging by the accusations and testimony heard in court, witches were not considered to be so much servants of the Devil as free agents, who acted for their own reasons or because they were inherently evil.

As we have seen, at least half the people denounced to the Bohuslän courts had long been reputed to be witches. Indeed, what fuelled the trials was the widespread belief that one or more people in each area were engaged in witchcraft. Often rumours had circulated for years, though officially nothing had come of it. What this and the relatively few accusations made by neighbours in the course of the trials show is that locals in Bohuslän did not usually turn to the law courts to deal with their fear of witches: they used other tactics, as the literature shows. One was to confront the suspect and try to persuade her to lift the spell. Another was to secure the help of another witch to ward off the magic with a counter-spell of some kind. The court records from Bohuslän provide evidence that these defence strategies were also used by communities there.

The narrative of the trials combined scholarly with traditional stereotypes about witchcraft, as the case of the shipwrecked fishing boat showed. This mixture of approaches was repeated in several cases and later in the stated grounds for the verdicts. A death sentence was invariably justified by reference to a pact with the Devil, but courts also cited traditional reasons such as *maleficium* and shape-shifting.

The majority of those found guilty by the courts were women. There were a handful of men who were convicted and executed for witchcraft,

but there were fewer of them in Bohuslän than in any other region of Sweden. Despite their small number, however, their fate confirms that witchcraft was not thought to be limited to women. The fact that most of the accusations were the result of the systematic torture of existing female suspects certainly added to the likelihood that few men would be denounced. For several reasons, as we have seen, it was harder for women to single out men when they were forced to name accomplices. Yet the fact cannot be ignored that more women than men may have gained a reputation for witchcraft. In Sörlin's study of witchcraft and superstition cases heard by the Göta Court of Appeal between 1635 and 1754, almost two-thirds of the defendants were women. The exact proportion varied according to the type of crime: women far outweighed men in *maleficium* cases or consorting with the Devil, while the gender distribution was more even when it came to charges of superstition.[6] In general, far more women than men were accused of witchcraft, both before and after Sweden's largest witch-hunts.

The Witches

In the scholarly tradition all witches were engaged in a collective conspiracy against society, but while there seems to have been little popular acceptance of the idea in Bohuslän at the time, it is possible people believed that witches could form a community of sorts. Johansen argues in his study of seventeenth-century witch trials in Jutland that there were popular myths about witches, including a belief that they were organised—that at chosen times they liked to gather in special places, for example at church, and hold initiation rites and the like. As Johansen's work is based on confessions obtained from suspected witches, it is unclear how general these beliefs were.[7]

Sörlin, in his study of the Göta Court of Appeal, cites Johansen and argues that there was a similar 'witch mythology' in Bohuslän; however, the court records from the witch trials in the province offer little or no clear evidence that this was the case at the community level.[8] Plainly, it was widely believed that there were a number of people in Bohuslän who might be thought witches—this was a key reason why so many people

[6] Sörlin 1993, 108.
[7] Johansen 1991, 69–70, 85–6, 158.
[8] Sörlin 1993, 29–30.

could be accused in such a short time, after all—but it is unclear to what extent people believed they were organised or might act collectively. There was one witness account that seemed to point to organised meetings between witches and the Devil: That was when one-handed Christen testified before the court in Kungälv that he had seen a large group of cats and dogs one Easter night, gathered around a tall, black man at councillor Johan Niebuhr's shed. It is unique as testimony goes, however, because in no other accusation or testimony heard by the court was it even hinted that witches held prearranged meetings.

In local accusations, witches' attacks were almost always the work of one or a couple of witches and targeted an individual, a couple, or someone's livestock. The only times collective attacks were mentioned were the story of the sinking of Thomas Andersson's fishing boat, and Ragnille's story of Marit Ruths and couple of other witches throwing copper horses into the sea. In both cases, the collective attacks were described by existing defendants, so it is difficult to determine how much they were influenced by their questioners and whatever their expectations of the cross-examinations were. It is equally conceivable that such stories did exist in the province's oral culture, but they never featured in local accusations.

In the court records, however, there was an evident belief that witches could act in pairs. One example was Marit Byskrivers, who confessed to learning witchcraft from Skåtte Gunelle. The same woman also appeared in Marit's story about the dream of the doll, a source of advice and support after her frightening experience. Linderholm believes that Gunelle may have played a decisive role too, and argues that the dream may actually have been a trance state that Gunelle had induced in Marit. However, the dream is interpreted; it seems likely that Marit and Gunelle shared magical secrets.

Another instance of two witches acting in concert was Marit Anundsdotter and Gunill Toresdotter, who were tried for witchcraft in north Bohuslän. Gunill had worked as a servant for Marit, and according to the witnesses, both women were known and feared for their witchcraft. Malin i Viken and Börta Sunnerborg from Kungälv seem to have been another pair. Both were notorious witches, and both had close relatives who had been executed for witchcraft. When Börta confessed, she portrayed herself as Malin's subordinate, which was reflected in the fact that she did Malin's household chores.

In all these pairs of witches, it appeared the more experienced one took the lead, while the other had a role reminiscent of a junior apprenticeship.

In that case, it would correspond to the belief that witches learnt by following someone who had a full command of witchcraft. There are hints in the court records that there were further pairs of women, but the evidence is vague.[9] There was also a married couple, Elin and Iver i Staxäng, where it is unclear if they had a master–apprentice relationship; however, it would seem from the witness accounts that Elin was the one their neighbours feared the most, even though Iver too had a reputation for witchcraft.

Supernatural Powers

The chief supernatural powers were God and the Devil, each with their entourage of angels and demons respectively. It cannot be excluded that there were other powers, other beliefs in the background—there were indications, but nothing definite was ever said at the hearings.

God and the Devil were not considered equals, but in the near panic of the witch-hunts, the authorities nevertheless attributed an impressive degree of power to the Devil. This was a source of some puzzlement among those on trial for witchcraft. Börta Cornelius, who after she underwent ordeal by water confessed to being in league with the Devil, told the third Commission about meeting the Devil and his followers, and when the court asked if many were there, Börta replied that 'The world is full of such people', and she thought it was strange that 'God allows Satan such power'.[10] She put in its simplest form a question that had occupied scholars and theologians ever since the witch-hunts had broken out.

It is uncertain to what extent the general population attributed such power to the Devil, though. The Church taught that life was an eternal struggle between good and evil, and the Devil or Antichrist constantly tried to gain mastery of all human souls. There is every sign that most people did not view the world in so polarised a fashion and thought

[9] This applies, for example, to Ragnille and Anna i Holta, where Ragnille confessed that she had learnt witchcraft from Anna (*Rannsakningarna*, 8 July 1669, 30). Kerstin i Lövri and Ingeborg i Bodilsröd were said to have done magic together, and one witness saw two women behaving oddly one night, who the court assumed were Kerstin and Ingeborg. Ingeborg, however, successfully denied the accusations (*Rannsakningarna*, 9 Sept. 1671, 270–1).

[10] *Rannsakningarna*, 238; RA, Kommissorialrätt 29 July 1671, fol. 28; see also Linderholm 1918, 222.

supernatural forces were more multifaceted. That God was the most powerful force in the world was something everyone could have agreed on, though.[11]

Judging by various statements made during the trials, God was believed to be omniscient: he knew everything that was happened on Earth, and everything people were thinking. In these contexts, he figured above all as God the just judge, the all-knowing, who would administer eternal justice after death. He would be stern towards those who had treated their fellow humans unjustly, but otherwise, he could be merciful and forgive certain sins.

Nothing the suspects said or did indicated they had any hope that God would come to their rescue. Perhaps most people believed he would never intervene to save an individual or to determine how people acted towards one another. That was at least the impression given by defendants during the trials, but we also know that, even so, people in trouble turned to God in the hope that their prayers would be answered.

Although, as I would argue, it may not have been common to expect God to manifest himself or to intervene on behalf of an individual, there was clearly a strong sense that people could tap into divine power in various ways. We have seen that the word of God, and even just his name, had such power that it could be used to ward off evil. One defendant told the court of going to an *offerkyrka* (lit. offering church) with her husband to be cured of an illness. It was a common practice in the early modern period: special churches where it was auspicious to make offerings were just one of several expressions of a widespread belief that divine power could manifest itself in certain particular places and in specific objects.[12] It was a power many people hoped would cure sickness, but it could also be effective in other contexts, such as ensuring a good harvest. Those who sought the help of powerful places or objects often seemed to have given alms of various kinds at the same time, and it was definitely usual to pray.[13]

In the Middle Ages, the cult of saints had offered people indirect mediation with God. With the Reformation this link officially disappeared, but

[11] There were people who argued that the Devil was the most powerful, of course, and Olli 2007, 86–8., 127, in her study of blasphemy, gives examples. In some cases, they said the reason they turned to the Devil was that God never had bothered to answer their prayers. There were also defendants who believed that God and the Devil were equally strong, so they invoked both at the same time.

[12] Weikert 2004.

[13] See Weikert 2004, 218–19, 222–29; Zachrisson 2017, 272–76.

given that people still considered God too powerful and too remote to be addressed directly—a conception of God seemingly shared by defendants in the Bohuslän witch trials—sacred places and objects which people could visit took on a similar mediating role. As Terese Zachrisson has found, some of these places were also associated with saints, who still played an important part in people's worldviews.[14]

The Devil took centre stage at the trials. The official view was that he lent his power to all forms of witchcraft and recruited witches to be his partisans in a huge conspiracy against Christendom. In the witness accounts in court, however, he had a different, less prominent role, and the connection between witchcraft and the Devil was more ambiguous.

There was still a belief that the Devil could take physical shape and walk the Earth, unlike God who was present in the world as a force and not a being. There were several examples in the court records of the Devil's ability to take the form of various animals. Forced confessions which spoke of familiars suggest there may also have been believed that the Devil had lesser demons at his command that could appear in the world.

Broadly speaking, however, the Devil of the witch trials was not as powerful or terrifying a figure as the Prince of Evil who the Church warned against. He was still frightening, though—as was evident from the fact that people preferred to avoid saying his name, and instead used a variety of noa-names.

Magical Forces

To an extent, the effect of magic was considered to stem from supernatural powers, channelled by those who mastered the right kind of knowledge. In the opinion of the Church, those powers were always evil, regardless of the purpose to which they were put. This was not a widely accepted view, though. The people who practised white magic to protect or cure often said their power came ultimately from God; those who went to wise women for help said much the same thing. However, there were also beliefs about other powers associated with magical ability. There were the various mythical beings of Nordic folklore, which witches were thought

[14] For surviving memories of saints, sacred objects, and places, see Zachrisson 2017, 250–55, 282–84.

to tap for power if they wished—creatures which supposedly lived underground and by some were considered able to cure disease.[15]

The power of witchcraft or *maleficium* seems to have had even more obscure origins in the popular worldview. It could be invoked with special techniques or tools, but equally, it was thought an innate force possessed by special people. The foundations of magic seem to have been ambiguous and partly obscured. In the literature, popular beliefs about magical powers have been likened to secret natural laws that could be used to do both good and evil.[16]

Various forms of white magic seem to have been practised frequently in Bohuslän at that time. This was true of everything from the simplest protective spells, used for household tasks, to advanced techniques and rituals that could only be performed by specialists. We can safely assume there were also people who deliberately engaged in *maleficium*, and used their knowledge of it as a threat. This was spelt out in the accusations made about maledictions and the existence of various magical objects, such as charm bags.

Protective and Healing Magic

The protective magic mentioned in the court records was of the kind intended to ward off malicious magical attacks on, for example, household activities. Protective spells were recited when putting livestock out to pasture, for example, in order to repulse not only *maleficium* but also all dangers that might befall the animals. The spoken charm was combined with ritual acts, gestures, or other techniques. Such simpler forms of protective magic did not require any special skill or obscure knowledge on the part of the user, but were used by people in all walks of life.

Spells and incantations were central to healing magic too. During the Bohuslän witch trials, the court was told about several types of charms to cure a variety of diseases or ailments. They generally seem to have included the name of a holy person such as Jesus, Mary, or a saint, and ended by naming the Holy Trinity and making the sign of the cross. It was a performative speech, supported by suitable gestures. Some charms were essentially a verbal figuration or repetition of a mythological rite, the idea being to create a connection between the deity's previous actions and the

[15] Wall 1989, 157–60; Alver 2008, 60.
[16] Henningsen 1995, 133.

current situation, which would conjure up the original force.[17] Although on the surface the charms had a distinctly Christian character, given that in some instances they were based on ancient spells, it is not certain that people thought they were invoking the Christian God. Many of the charms did indeed end by naming the Holy Trinity, which as the literature suggests may have been a stereotypical addition in order to provide a legitimising framework for a forbidden skill.[18]

In the course of the hearings, some known healers became involved. Judging by the testimony of people who went to healers, as well as the healers' own confessions in court, the magic not only relied on words, but it was also common for anyone seeking help to be offered food or drink of various kinds. The drink seems frequently to have been aquavit, neat or mixed with special ingredients, and the food, everyday fare such as porridge or bread and butter. Occasionally, witnesses spoke of wise women adding secret ingredients to the food, and it is likely that anything eaten or drunk was accompanied by spells and other magical rites; however, both the witnesses who had hired wise women and the healers themselves were silent on the last point.[19]

Witchcraft

In the light of what emerged at the Bohuslän trials, witchcraft in the popular worldview was primarily synonymous with various forms of *maleficium* or magical harm. The concept of witchcraft could be broader than that, though, including other magical activities that were thought alarming without being directly harmful. The story of Per Matsson's weather-pipe was an example. Malin's knack for making milk pails dance was perhaps another. There were other forms of witchcraft too, but as they were never mentioned in court, they fall outside the scope of the present investigation.

There was some evidence for the belief that witchcraft was a secretive business that required knowledge only learnt by spending time in the company of an expert. When cross-examined, Ragnille said she was told Malin Andersdotter in Marstrand had been apprenticed to Anna i Holta.

[17] See, for example, Raudvere 2003, 50.

[18] As argued by Klintberg 1980, 63, for example.

[19] See, for example, *Rannsakningarna*, 14 Sept. 1671, 286–7; *Rannsakningarna*, 15 Sept. 1671, 295.

According to Ragnille, one day Malin's aunt had sighed and said she had heard that 'little Malin has been schooled for three months by Anna i Holta, and learnt Satan's tricks'. When the aunt was questioned about it, she said she did not remember, but nor did she dare deny saying it either.[20]

Witchcraft was considered an innate ability by some, as we have seen. Some of those with a reputation for witchcraft who were denounced to the courts also had a close relative, usually their mother, who had previously been convicted of witchcraft. Obviously, it was believed that witchcraft could be inherited, and people related to witches were at great risk of being suspected themselves.

Among the important weapons in the witch's arsenal were the words used in maledictions and other types of curses or rituals. The belief that words could exist in conjunction with the phenomena they described was common in premodern culture; the connection was an important element in magical thinking, be it malicious, protective, or healing.

It is unclear how people thought maledictions worked. They may have been seen as a threat, menacing the victim with witchcraft that would be implemented using other techniques, but it is more likely the words themselves were thought to have the power to bring misfortune or set in motion the evil forces which in time would affect the victim. In order for a malediction to be effective, however, certain special conditions had to be met first, the most important of which was that whoever recited the words had to have a command of witchcraft. Circumstances such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures will also have played a significant role. If someone not reputed to be a witch uttered the same words, they would have been dismissed as harmless expletives.

Maledictions can be regarded as purely performative utterances. When conditions were right, the status of the intended victim was altered the very moment the words were spoken: the victim was accursed and vulnerable to misfortunes of various kinds. Opinions seem to have varied about how long it would take for disaster to befall the victim, but their new identity as a cursed person was a source of boundless worry and left them willing to ascribe any and all mishaps to the malediction.

Witchcraft could also operate through various objects or materials, charged with magical power by spells and special rituals, and then hidden in the victim's vicinity. In some cases, the thing possessed its own magical power, such as soil from a churchyard, which could be combined with

[20] *Rannsakningarna*, 34; VaLA, GHA 8 July 1669, fol. 16.

other magical things in a charm bag to make it even more effective. When such charm bags were put together, rituals and spells were surely important components. Witches were also thought able to imbue everyday objects with power, transforming them into magical tools with which to do harm or to promote their interests.

Finally, the popular worldview also shared the idea that witchcraft was innate to some people. They could do evil with a glance—a belief usually called the evil eye—or the merest touch. Even more important in this context was the belief in the *håg*, a concept with roots in older Nordic folklore that equated to the soul or the mental powers in toto. Historians and folklorists have emphasised the enduring importance of the soul in Nordic folk culture.[21] The traditional view was that a person's soul or *håg* could act outside the body and in some cases could also shape-shift: it could inflict harm without the need for personal contact, in other words.

In the Nordic worldview, there was a strong connection between the willed soul and witchcraft, and with emotions such as anger and envy. If a person considered to have a strong *håg* was wracked by these emotions, it was thought they would be able to sway others. It was in everyone's best interests to avoid stirring a known witch of this type to anger or envy.

Admittedly, the soul or *håg* was not mentioned as such in the Bohuslän witch trials, and neither was the verb for exerting such influence, *hugsa*, which is known from later folklore records. Nevertheless, it is possible to glimpse one or both driving some of the local accusations. Testimony about witches who shape-shifted would have been based on the belief that it was their soul that had taken on a new form. In several cases, it is not clear how the victims thought the witchcraft worked, but it is possible they imagined that it was the witch's *håg* that did the damage.

I would like to finish by noting that some of the more spectacular witchcraft stories told in court bore obvious similarities to testimony from witch trials in Denmark. In a Jutland trial in the early seventeenth century, it was said suspects had tried to destroy the local fisheries by putting copper horses in the water.[22] There were stories of witches who took the form of birds and flew out to sea to sink a fishing boat. Although there are important detail differences between the Jutland and Bohuslän stories, in all essentials the basic plots were still strikingly similar. The account of Malin Ruths falling into the well when she was in the form of a cat was a

[21] See, for example, Östling 2002, 71–5; Van Gent 2009, 61.
[22] Johansen 1991, 78.

retelling of a Danish story, for example. Another similarity was that the Devil went largely unmentioned in the Jutland trials, while familiars or petty devils featured quite often, especially in confessions, and the same was true of the Bohuslän hearings.[23] Such analogous stories would seem to testify to cultural contacts that spanned the Kattegat and Skagerrak, which is not surprising given that until recently both been part of the Danish Empire, and both were coastal provinces with fishing populations who had had close contacts throughout history.

Dimensions of Reality

The testimony in court embodied a perception of reality which extended beyond the visible and where everyone was prepared for the true nature of things to be disguised. The boundary between the everyday and the supernatural dimensions of reality appears both vague and dreamlike.

Dreamworlds

Several cases showed that strong dreams could be taken as supernatural experiences. Some of the accused women spoke of dreams in which they travelled to other places and had disturbing experiences. The stories, formulated as confessions, made it clear that the women feared what had happened in their dreams were in fact real encounters with supernatural forces. These dreamt experiences had made a strong impression. By her own account, Malin Byskrivers had her strange dream over twenty years before, when it had worried her so much she had approached the parish priest for help.

It is unclear what people thought happened when they dreamt of travelling, but the consensus seems to have been some sort of soul journey. Special dream souls that can leave the body during sleep and visit places known or unknown are known in many cultures; however, it was only in special circumstances that the dream soul could travel outside the body, and thus not all dreams were taken to be soul journeys.[24] Most likely, the

[23] Johansen 1991, 79–80. One difference was that the little devils in the Danish trials, as Johansen says, were often thought responsible for *maleficium* and other magical damage. Whereas in Bohuslän, they limited themselves to helping with chores and keeping the witches company.

[24] Von Sydow 1935, 101.

women's stories grew from similar beliefs, and when it came down to specifics that they imagined that it was their *håg* or souls that had gone travelling outside the body.

The destinations of these dream journeys varied. In Gertrud's case, it was a high mountain above by a lake. Marit spoke of walking up a green hill reminiscent of a place in the area called Björnängen; Ingrid Dinnes of a green pasture, without specifying where it might have been. Malin Andersson, though, went to a place known to everyone in court: 'the islet off the great stone fortress' in Marstrand.[25] In other words, they said they dreamt about vague, unfamiliar places, but also well-known places nearby. If it was the dream soul or the *håg* soul that made the journey, it is likely it was intended it should take place in another dimension of reality that was not visible to other people.

The women's experiences during these dreams centred on fear. Gertrud suffered severe vertigo on the mountaintop so she crossed herself, showing she thought that evil was present. Marit's dream had two separate parts, where the first, which revolved around her biting the head off a doll, seems to have evoked the strongest fear, and the second, which was about a witches' sabbat with the Devil and his followers, did not seem as frightening. Malin's and Ingrid's dreams were not clearly associated with fear, but there was undeniably a degree of worry in Malin's dream when she thought she had been let down in it, sign that she feared Anna had introduced her to witchcraft against her will.

In each case, it was said to be a dream that paved the way for a supernatural encounter. The confessions in court confirm the dreams had come to the women when they were asleep, and there was no suggestion they were deliberately induced trance states. For a dream to be thought a supernatural experience, it must have differed from normal dreams by making an unusually strong impression. That both Gertrud and Marit said they had suffered from severe dizziness during their dreams may have been a distinguishing feature of supernatural experiences when asleep.

If the boundary between dream and reality was thought to be porous, and there was a widespread belief that certain dreams, and especially strong dreams, could be real encounters with supernatural powers, this would have added to increasing the sense of anxiety and panic associated with witch trials.

[25] *Rannsakningarna*, 29 July 1669, 44.

Stratified Reality

On several occasions, there was evidence of a widespread belief that witches could shape-shift. It is likely it was connected with far older notions in Nordic culture about shape-shifting. According to tradition, however, it was not only witches who had the ability; it could be an innate skill and even possessed by people who did not practise witchcraft.

The belief that witches could shape-shift was not limited to Nordic culture, of course. It can be found in many places.[26] However, the mechanics of it could be explained in different ways. In Bohuslän, there was no evidence that special assistance from the Devil was required. Judging by contemporary cases in the Duchy of Lorraine studied by Robin Briggs, the situation there was different. Several of those accused of assuming animal forms in order to attack people confessed that it was the Devil or one of his demons who had transformed them, using some kind of ointment to do so, while in a couple of the stories various animal skins were used.[27] In Bohuslän, the ability to shape-shift appears to have been thought an inherent and probably innate ability.

Regardless of whether belief in the witches' ability to shape-shift was based on the Nordic tradition of shape-shifting or on other ideas, it meant that any creature they met could have a completely different nature than the visible one. A cat, a dog, or a crow could in fact be a witch who had temporarily changed shape. Worse, it could also be the Devil, who had taken the form of an animal in order to get close to humans without being noticed.

Such beliefs meant reality could be thought to consist of different layers, where the surface did not always correspond to its true essence. This was true not only of living beings but also of matter. Evidently, people were certain that witches could shape-shift, just as they knew about the Devil's ability to take on different forms. When Malin i Lunden accused Anna i Holta of having gone about as a brindled cat when trying to harm Malin's family, the court showed no signs of doubting her word. The claims that the witches who wanted to sink the fishing boat from Mollösund flew there in the guise of various birds seem to have done nothing to undermine the credibility of the testimony. Indeed, the ability to fly their temporary shapes gave them was a prerequisite for being able to sink the

[26] See, for example, Behringer 2004, 12–13.; Bever 2013, 54.
[27] Briggs 2007, 125–8.

boat in the first place. The judges in Göta Court of Appeal seem to have been convinced too, and specifically mentioned shape-shifting into birds in its verdict. Further evidence that the local elite shared these ideas was the two Marstrand priests who, without hesitation, passed on their relatives' testimony about Karin Sköttes shape-shifting from cat to human.

Even the true nature of an object could be hidden from view. A tobacco pipe, for example, could in fact be a magical tool for controlling the weather; enchanted sticks or an animal horn placed an enemy's land could bring misfortune that threatened the happiness of the household.

The belief that something's true nature was not always visible, and that reality could thus accommodate several layers, appears to have been fundamental to perceptions of reality at the time. Religious culture supported such a view, after all: even in the Lutheran doctrine of the sacraments, the bread and wine were changed during the Eucharist, even though there were no visible traces. This was also a period of sometimes heated discussions among European scholars about the reliability of visual impressions, as we have seen. Informed by both the demonological interpretations and the various confessional stances on the Eucharist, influential figures in the debate emphasised that the true nature of reality was not always visible to the eye.[28]

Hidden Intimidation

Shifting shapes, shifting realities: the beliefs evidenced during the witch trials brought to the fore a related theme. In a variety of contexts, there was a pressing concern about hidden threats. The notion that cats, dogs, or other animals that behaved strangely might in fact be evil witches out to harm people only fuelled such concerns.

The magic objects that witches used to inflict damage were usually concealed, the idea being they would do their worst unbeknownst to the victim. Charm bags were hidden in houses or put where the victims would have to step over them, animal horns or other objects were secreted on others' land so their households would suffer. The fear of such attacks was said to have been exacerbated by the widespread perception that witchcraft became stronger if it could be practised in secret. Self-defence was tried in the form of magic. Those who feared they were the subject of secret witchcraft could go to a wise woman for help, as some of them were

[28] Clark 2007, 1–7 *et passim*.

known to use magical techniques to trace witchcraft and identify the culprits. There were also rites and spells that the victims themselves could perform. One example was Gertrud i Kittelröd's response when she thought witchcraft was the reason her butter failed to churn properly. By throwing three spoons of the cream onto the fire while reciting the Lord's Prayer three times, but omitting the phrase 'Forgive us our sins', the witch who had secretly enchanted the cream would be revealed.

It is probable that at a general level there would have been worries about hidden hostility. Were the traditional concept of luck, predicated on limited good, was widespread, it alone would have been cause for concern. There was also reason to fear that some might secretly harbour envy or malice when things went well for their neighbours. In other words, there were multiple reasons to worry that behind every peaceful, friendly demeanour lurked an enemy wracked with secret hatred, busy forging evil plans.

Consensus was much prized in contemporary culture, and the Church tried to promote reconciliation with a variety of rites. It was part of the preparations for Holy Communion that parishioners had to be shriven by the priest, and for that they had to confess if they felt ill will towards any of the other churchgoers; those who did not want to reconcile with their enemies was not worthy of the Eucharist, according to both the Church's teachings and popular belief. Thus, premodern culture offered a strong and recurring incentive for reconciliation. The importance attached to consensus was proved indirectly by the fact that enmity, and in particular hidden hostility, was regarded as a serious threat to local communities.

Fear and Trust

Given the threats posed by witchcraft and the supernatural in premodern life, it might be reasonable to assume that people lived in a permanent state of terror. Several historians have indeed argued that fear was the key determinant in Western culture in the late Middle Ages and the premodern period: endless crises and inadequate skills and technology to cope with disease and food insecurity, in combination with the supernatural threats integral to the worldview of the day, created an atmosphere of almost permanent fear.[29] Yet this account has been the subject of some criticism from other historians. As Clark points out, people then were not

[29] Naphy and Roberts 1997, 1–2 and works cited there.

aware that they lacked the scientific explanations and cures we have, and consequently, we cannot draw any conclusions from what to modern eyes appears deficient in its grasp of reality.[30]

When the premodern worldview is assumed to have simply added to people's fears with imaginary dangers such as various spirits and supernatural forces, the perspective becomes too one-sided. Yes, there were dangers we would dismiss as imaginary, but their same worldview also offered remedies—there were things that could be done that could counteract the fear. The notion that humans lived in fear for centuries on end also appears dubious on more general grounds.

The idea that the premodern worldview with its beliefs about the supernatural created a culture where fear and worry had a prominent role in daily life is also found in the Swedish literature. Östling argues that the *håg* or soul must have had a 'stressful psychological significance' which 'led to people living in constant fear and viewing their fellow human beings in disbelief'.[31] His particular concern is people's fear of hidden enmity, which in combination with beliefs about the power of the mind would have done much to drive both fear and suspicion; that these feelings should have been constant, however, seems exaggerated. The same applies when other Swedish historians argue that belief in magic left people living in a permanent state of emergency.[32]

Such characterisations of the mood of the time signally fail to recognise that the premodern worldview also offered supernatural cures for *maleficium*. People were not left to the mercy of evil personified. In addition, it is known from across early modern Europe that one way of dealing with witchcraft was to confront the suspects and try by various means to persuade them to cease their witchery. The fact that people dared to meet witches face to face shows that their fears were not insurmountable. Anna Olufsdotter's confrontation of Elin i Staxäng is a good example.

In general, there is a risk that we will overestimate the importance of fear in the premodern conception of reality, while at the same time underestimating the sense of security that the same worldview could provide. Belief in a divine power that could heal and help in everyday life certainly played a key role for most people. The conviction that God would eventually set everything right may also have meant that trust was the constant,

[30] Clark 1983, 81–99.
[31] Östling 2002, 74–5.
[32] Frykman 1991, 31.

not fear. Per Larsson from Mollösund definitely had that confidence, when he kept repeating (to the court's annoyance) that surely God would forgive him.

As in all histories of witchcraft, the darker side of life can take too prominent a place. We should not forget there were also lighter moments; that despite it all, when opportunity arose, people were happy to enjoy parties and games. There are faint echoes of the festivities which were part of life in defendants' accounts of gatherings with the Devil. They were usually described as cheerful events, with plenty of beer and wine and sometimes drummers and others who played while everyone danced.

Finally, what of the suggestion that magical thought and a belief in the supernatural are universals of human nature. It has been said that evolutionary biology and cognitive science teach us that at the dawn of human history we developed various cognitive systems that gradually became innate—the ability to learn languages, grammar, intuitive perceptions of basic physical principles—to which some have added an innate ability to see events about us as intentionally caused by conscious agents. This in turn encouraged us to interpret events in terms of rewards or punishments, depending on whether they were benevolent or *malevolent*.[33]

Such hypotheses are not only linked to magical thinking but also linked to religious behaviour as a whole and humankind's willingness to trust in the existence of the gods. From this perspective, a premodern worldview with its magical thinking and search for meaning would thus appear more natural to us than the modern, scientific conception of reality. It could be only human to perceive the world as enchanted.

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[33] See Bever 2012, 5–9 and works cited there. According to these theories, people developed a 'hyperactive agency detection device' (Bever 2012, 8).

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Appendix

The women and men who stood trial for witchcraft in the Swedish province of Bohuslän, 1669–1672.

1. Anna i Holta
2. Ragnille Jens Svenses (aka Glanan)
3. Ingeborg Slakters
4. Malin Slakters
5. Ingrid Jutes
6. Malin Ruths
7. Marit Byskrivers
8. Margareta Sven Snickares
9. Kerstin Svenses
10. Karin Klockars
11. Malin Olsdotter (aka Malin i Viken)
12. Karin Sköttes
13. Gertrud Simon Madtses
14. Börta Sunnerborg
15. Simon Madtses
16. Cidsela Tolle Svendsens (aka Cidsela Simonsdotter)
17. Anna Jens Cronis
18. Malin på Härön
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