CHAPTER TWO

MAGIC, WITCHCRAFT, AND THE NATURE OF THE ROD

One day, at Goldenhöhe, a miner was carrying a chunk of mineral ore when he saw a mining gnome. Since the miner forgot to give the proper greeting, the spirit grabbed the ore and smashed it to the floor into a thousand pieces. Twisting and screaming, it disappeared, and the earth trembled. When the miner recovered from his shock, he told his story, and never forgot to greet the Berggeist again.\(^1\)

Now and again there were spirits in the mountains, especially at the mines: small gray creatures wearing large felt hats. They abducted and killed miners when they did not behave properly. They were to stand to the right and keep silent.\(^2\)

These were the spirits of the Erzgebirge, born of the waving shadows, eerie sounds, and grotesque forms that confounded the underground worker. Deep in the bowels of the earth, the real miner felt as small as these diminutive diggers in miner garb. The cause of countless accidents and misfortunes underground, the spirits could also warn of impending dangers and unsafe conditions. There were good and evil mountain spirits. So deeply rooted were they in mining culture, in 1869, the folklorist Wenzel Peiter could warn against challenging the “old miner” of the Erzgebirge about his belief in Berggeist.\(^3\)

But talk of mining spirits had in fact declined markedly since the Reformation. Dogmatic clerics, scholars, and state officials preoccupied with religious orthodoxy and social control had sought to reform mining culture. Scholars of the early sixteenth century, such as Paracelsus and Georg Agricola, acknowledged both good and evil spirits, but authors writing some decades later denounced all varieties. Jean Bodin, a major Catholic theorist of witchcraft, identified even the helpful mining spirit with Satan in his influential demonology of 1580, *De la Demonomanie des Sorciers*. A Protestant preacher in the mining town of Scheibenberg, Saxony, Christian Lehmann (1611–1688),

\[^2\] Heilfurth, *Bergbau und Bergmann*, 537.
\[^3\] In Heilfurth, *Bergbau und Bergmann*, 177.
reduced all sightings to diabolical delusions, and Caspar Posner published an important essay on spirits at Jena in 1662. He reviewed learned authorities from the days of Agricola, but considered the Devil to be the author of all sightings. According to the folklorist, Fritz Roth, the more generic name ‘devil’ gradually replaced individual and local names for mining spirits. Enlightenment-era social reformers and educators largely completed the eradication of belief in mining spirits among the lower orders that earlier theologians had begun. Today, one is hard-pressed to meet anybody in the Erzgebirge who truly believes that mining gnomes roam the hills and tunnels.

Like underground spirits, the dowsing or divining rod (Wünschelrute) was a major component of pre-modern mining culture. The forked stick was used in all manner of magical treasure hunting, sometimes involving mining spirits and other creatures on the mountain. Dowsing rods, like special mirrors and crystal balls, functioned as instruments of sorcery that offered hidden knowledge of the underworld. The mining folklore is rich in examples. According to one tale, a group of miners once set out with a rod to a region reputedly rich in mineral deposits. The rod dipped strongly before a loud noise echoed through the forest, and the lantern extinguished, “as if the evil spirit would appear.” The miners ran home and never tried the dowsing rod again.7 The same forces of social disciplining and confessionalization that purged the mountains of mining spirits threatened the dowser as well, but his practice survived the early-modern period more firmly identified as the distinctive instrument of the proud miner.

This chapter introduces the dowsing rod and begins charting its unique historical path. Early opponents wished to identify the practice with witchcraft. Theologians and philosophers intent on ridding the mines of diabolical influence said that practitioners made an ‘implicit’ pact with the Devil. However suggestive, the opinion was impotent against the widespread use of rods in mining, where a powerful theory

4 “Während die Volkssage gute und böse Züge im Bilde des Bergmönches kennt, erscheint bei Lehmann nur das Verderbliche seines Wesens.” Fritz Roth, Christian Lehmanns Leben und Werke und seine Stellung zum Aberglauben (Marburg: C.M. Gärtner, 1933), 64.
5 “Hic enim commodiorem occasionem sumit insidias & ludos faciendi hominibus Satanas,” in Diatribe physica de virunculis metallicis. In Heilfurth, Bergbau und Bergmann, 132.
6 Roth, Christian Lehmanns Leben, 64.
7 Heilfurth, Bergbau und Bergmann, 962.