Superintendent of Mining at Freiberg, Augustus Beyer, once came to the village of Reichenbach looking for a skilled dowser. Beyer was informed that an “old and honest carpenter” lived in the region that could find hidden treasures with a metal ball and some string. Beyer found this man and followed him into the hills, where he hung a small ball on the two middle fingers of his right hand, stretched out his arm, and walked slowly to the mines. As the carpenter approached the mines, the superintendent was amazed to see the ball begin to twirl. The closer the carpenter came, the faster the ball twirled. Beyer wanted to try for himself, so he took the ball and string and tied it to his fingers just like the carpenter had. The man then grabbed Beyer’s wrist like a physician checking a pulse and led him slowly to the spot. The ball began to twirl. “I will leave it to the scholars to figure out the cause of this effect,” said Beyer. “Be assured, it was no superstition, spell, or deception.”

While the account above reads like folklore, in fact it was the testimony of the same mine surveyor we met in Chapter Three. Beyer told of this encounter of around 1720 in the same mine surveying book. From a modern perspective it is paradoxical that one of the highest officers in Saxon mining, Superintendent at Freiberg, would consult a dowser, and we are inclined to assume that the encounter was apocryphal or folklore. But the tales that folklorists collected beginning in the late eighteenth century derived from real events.

After the Thirty Years War, Saxon mining figured more centrally than ever before as the fiscal arm of the state, and bureaucrats and officials sought more reliable knowledge of mineral resources. Mining officials developed a science that legitimized the dowsing rod as the proper instrument of the Bergverständiger, or experienced miner, and that distinguished it from superstition and witchcraft. We now go to the Erzgebirge to ask again how this vernacular science played out in the field. Freiberg in particular was at the vanguard of mining science.

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1 Beyer, Unterricht, 222.
and that included the patronage and evaluation of dowsers. ‘True stories’ of Freiberg dowsers show that the formulation of mining science was the product of real struggle in the field, much as it involved new laboratory practices. Officials and chemists like Johann Friedrich Henckel were practical-minded and accepted the possibility of dowsing, but they were also skeptical, bringing dowsing and dowsers into a more critical spotlight than at the Dübener Moor in 1713/14. Again, this is uncharted territory in the historiography of mining and geology, which has neglected the widespread employment of dowsers by the Saxon mining jurisdictions, including the central office at Freiberg (Oberbergamt). The phenomenon offers a unique insight into the values and beliefs of miners and mining officials, and their effort to define and authorize mining knowledge just decades prior to the founding of the Freiberg Mining Academy (1765).

Officials in the Erzgebirge addressed the patronage of dowsers in various papers, among them the regular reports from the field on conditions at the mines (Grubenberichten), and correspondence between the mining jurisdictions and with the Dresden mining administration concerning hired dowsers. This chapter analyzes a sample of such archival material spanning the first half of the eighteenth century. We select a packet of mine reports for the Saxon jurisdiction of Oberwiesenthal high in the Erzgebirge, and we analyze a number of letters and contracts between Freiberg and Dresden officials concerning individual dowsers. This material will also help us develop a profile of the hired dowser. While idiosyncrasy was his trademark, the legitimate practitioner exhibited characteristic traits and behaviors. These included humility, deference to officials, and appeal to divine grace. He demonstrated a tacit knowledge of dowsing and had (preferably formal) mining experience. He was a Bergverständiger, or knower of the mines and mountain. The epistemological status of the rod was tied to the ability of the practitioner to demonstrate that identity. Immodest claims and boasting, utterance of magical words, use of the rod as an instrument of sorcery, and inexperience at the mines, all suggested incompetence or superstition to the mining jurisdictions. Historians and sociologists of science have emphasized the significance of character and social credibility in establishing truth-claims largely in terms of how gentlemanly culture verified new science.2 Here, we witness a

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2 Some examples include Martin J.S. Rudwick, The Great Devonian Controversy: the Shaping of Scientific Knowledge among Gentlemanly Specialists (Chicago: University