Chapter 29

Magic in the Early Modern Period in Denmark

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The practice of magic in medieval and early modern Denmark can for analytical purposes be divided into two main types, namely sorcery or unlawful magic (including diabolical witchcraft and curative magic) and learned or natural magic. This also roughly follows a demarcation of concepts applied throughout Europe in the period in question.

Witchcraft in Medieval and Reformation Denmark

Only circumstantial evidence attests to the existence of unlawful magic being practised in medieval Denmark. In 1080 Pope Gregor VII criticised the Danish King Harald III for holding witches responsible for misfortunes which, according to the pope, in reality were punishments sent by God. The Scanian Church Law and The Sealandian Church Law, both dating from ca. 1170, mention punishment for homicide by means of sorcery. Town statutes from the early fourteenth century draw attention to bewitchment of persons, whereas a fifteenth-century amendment to the secular Jutlandic Law, originally issued in 1241, provides a description of procedures to be followed in cases concerning bewitchment of one’s possessions, presumably animals. How these laws were put into effect remains unknown due to lack of records. It is not until after the Lutheran Reformation of 1536 that evidence of trials against witches or sorcerers exists.

In the wake of the Reformation the Danish Church actively began to combat sorcery. The concerns of the Church were directed towards sorcery and the use of, e.g., magical incantations and formulas. In his Visitation Book of ca. 1544 Peder Palladius (1503–1560), the bishop of Sealand, called for the clergy to warn the population against consulting the local healer, conjurer or midwife who used magic. In the opinion of the Church, such persons were sorcerers or witches, and the populace was to be warned that it was the duty of every good Christian to report such sorcerers to the authorities lest one risk being accused of aiding the devil. The sorcerers themselves would now, since the clear light of the Gospel had begun to shine in Denmark, as Palladius put it, get what they deserved, namely death at the stake. He reported ‘a herd of them’ to have been burnt of late in Malmö, Køge, and other towns, and in Western and Southern
Denmark they were ‘hunted as wolves’ with fifty-two having recently been burnt. No records survive to determine the actual extent of these persecutions, and Palladius might have exaggerated to press his point. Palladius, however, also wrote how the sorcerers were ‘crowding to pass over to the next world’ because one of them would betray the other (Jacobsen 1925–1926: 110). The effect of such denunciations appears to have been comprehensive, and there was at the time a real possibility of Denmark developing into a country with large-scale witch-crazes.

Prevention of Large-Scale Witch-Hunts

Legal measures were quickly taken, however, to dampen the ostensibly victorious Bishop Palladius and the Church. The Copenhagen articles of 1547 decreed that accusations from dishonest individuals, a term which extended to witches, could not on their own lead to the conviction of an accused person. Alleged accomplices could therefore not be prosecuted on the basis of the confession of a witch. The articles also forbade the use of torture before the final sentence, preventing forced confessions. This is reflected in the records where confessions are rare. These legal measures, unique in a European perspective, were quite clearly aimed at limiting the large-scale persecutions hinted at by Palladius. Furthermore, the Kalundborg statutes of 1576 subjected all capital sentences pronounced by lower court juries to automatic appeal to higher courts. This halted the otherwise customary immediate execution of a witch who had been found guilty by a local court. Making appeal compulsory would later be a common strategy for dealing with witch convictions across Europe, but Denmark was the first secular court to adopt this practice.

Also of importance was the fact that accusatory procedure applied in Danish witch-trials. The alleged victim took the initiative to accuse the person he or she believed to have caused harm. This was contrary to most other parts of Europe, where inquisitorial procedure applied, and where inquiries could be set up and cases decided by an inquisitor. Initially, that type of procedure often led to large-scale witch-crazes, but eventually also led to the demise of the entire phenomenon. In Denmark, however, witches were almost always accused on an individual basis. The combination of the Danish criminal codes and the legal procedure had profound effects on the further development of the Danish witch-trials. Although Denmark was the most active witch-hunting country in Scandinavia, large-scale witch-hunts did not occur.

Almost all of the Danish cases were concerned with specific crimes by use of sorcery or *maleficia*, mostly infliction of illnesses or subsequently death on