

Martin Elbel: Magic and witch-hunts in early modern Europe (KHI/EMAG)

Early modern Europe saw several waves of panic during which thousand of women, but also men, were accused of witchcraft and executed. The victims of the trials were forced to make confessions in which they admitted the pact with the devil, casting spells, murders, cannibalism, and other abominable crimes. These horror tales circulated among the population and made significantly influenced European culture. The complexity of this phenomenon provokes many questions: What was the cultural background of the witchcraft and magic in general? What did trigger and fuel the witch-trials? Why did they happen so late - in the period of the emerging modern world, instead of the "dark Middle Ages"? Why did the panic last so long and why did it eventually stop? What was the impact of witch-hunts in the modern world? Although the course will deal mainly with the early modern European witch-hunts, its scope is much wider. There are two major underlaying themes. First, it aims at discussing the position of magic in European culture. Early cultural anthropologists (Tylor, Frazer) saw magic as a primitive form of human thought and behaviour which was, in the process of human development, replaced first by religion and later by science. Next generations of scholars however discovered that the relationship between magic, religion and science is much more complex. These categories are intertwined; their boundaries are blurred and overlapping. Yet the European history is marked with regular attempts to define and delineate magic, religion and science as three separate realms of thought and behaviour. The seminar will discuss some of these attempts (which culminated in early modern witch-hunts) and their impact on European culture. It will demonstrate that the changing attitudes towards magic helped to define not only Europe's main religious systems (Judaism, Christianity) but also modern science. Second, the course will focus on the "mechanism of persecution". The outbreak of the witch-panic could dramatically alter social and power relations at the local level. Many studies suggest that witch-hunting was closely related to other processes and problems in the society. Accusation of witchcraft could be often used as a tool to sort out accumulated tension between neighbours, while other individuals could use the trials to pursue their own agenda. Yet the dynamism was not limited to the mere uses of the alleged witches as scapegoats. The course will try and address some of those issues - paying, of course, closer attention to gender aspects. It will, however, also include comparison with other "witch-hunts", both older (trials with heretics, Templars, medieval pogroms) and modern (anti-Semitism and the Shoah, Communist terror, McCarthyism, etc.).