

„Processes must be purified!” - Georgius Podhradszky and the Investigation of the Hungarian Chancellery during the Great Witch-hunt of Szeged 1728-1729

The scholarly examination of witchcraft emerged as a well-established field within European historiography following the anthropological turn of the 1970s. Naturally, this domain has facilitated inquiries into the political and juridical authority of elites and institutions, particularly in relation to judicial proceedings (e.g. appellate court interventions). Given the unique nature of the extant sources, only a few trials can be investigated due to the dichotomy of the centres and peripheries and the Szeged trials are one of those.

The great witch-hunt of Szeged (1728-1729) constitutes the most extensive prosecution against witches in Hungary. It has played a prominent role in the research due to its early fame and abundance of trial records. The scale of the suit (15 death penalties, over a hundred procedural participants), the demonological elements (e.g., pact with the devil) and the juridico-legal complexities (e.g. reliance on foreign legal sources), differ from other contemporary single trial cases. Due to its late appearance and well publicized unorthodox procedures (e.g. swimming of witches) the incidence had a wide contemporary reception from Vienna to Edinburgh (e.g. theatre plays, news articles, travel accounts, scientific treatises).

Following the first exactions in July of 1728 a public outcry ensued. In response the major and chief notary Georgius Podhradszky warned the city authorities of an impending scrutiny of the trials by the Hungarian Chancellery. Stationed in Pressburg during the national Diet, he corresponded extensively with the Szeged council, addressing procedural irregularities. A well-educated jurist, trained in Rome and Vienna, Podhradszky proposed revisions to trial records and effectively defended the city's legal position.

Despite the Szeged trials' notoriety, the subsequent governmental investigation remains underexplored. This presentation examines the legal controversy between the municipal authorities and the Chancellery, highlighting one of the earliest instances of state-driven scepticism towards witch trials in the Kingdom of Hungary.

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Proposal

Coercion and Negotiating Power. Revisiting Seigneurial Rule in the Holy Roman Empire

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Recent scholarship on rule in early modern Europe attributes considerable agency to subjects, depicting the exercise of power as negotiation process between various actors. By adopting this approach, scholars moved away from traditional top-down models and developed new frameworks, such as “acceptance-oriented rule”, which emphasizes the importance of a bottom-up perspective on rule. While the newer models provide valuable insights, they also risk overlooking the asymmetric power dynamics inherent in early modern power structures and potentially overstating the agency of subjects. This becomes particularly apparent when analysing seigneurial regimes. They constitute a significant and widespread yet presently underexamined formation of early modern rule in the Holy Roman Empire and hold considerable potential for advancing our understanding of rule more general during this period.

This paper explores the outcomes of negotiation processes through a case study of the monastery of Schlägl in Upper Austria in the 16th and 17th centuries. Rather than reverting to outdated top-down perspectives, the aim is to develop a nuanced understanding of seigneurial regimes, informed by recent research on early modern rule, with a critical examination of the effectiveness of subject’s agency. The analysis will assess the scope for action available to subjects, the impact of their actions such as complaints or acts of resistance, and the deployment of coercive measures by their lords.

The case study forms part of a habilitation project investigating seigneurial regimes within the Holy Roman Empire. The project adopts a long-term and comparative perspective and analyses the specific characteristics of rule in seigneurial regimes. It pays particular attention to changes within this seemingly stable structure of rule and power, which frequently faced protests and resistance from subjects, and explores the embeddedness of seigneurial regimes within larger contexts of rule, such as territorial rule, as well as their role in shaping state-building processes.

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Short CV

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| since 2021 | University of Münster , Research Associate (Post-Doc) at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg “Legal Unity and Pluralism” |
| 2022 | Dresden University of Technology (TU Dresden) , Doctorate in history, with a focus on early modern Europe |
| 2019–2020 | University of Warwick, UK , Visiting Researcher |
| 2018–2021 | TU Dresden , Doctoral Scholarships by the Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes and the Graduate Academy, TU Dresden |
| 2017–2018 | TU Dresden , Research Associate, Collaborative Research Centre 1285 “Invectivity. Constellations and Dynamics of Disparagement” |
| 2016–2017 | TU Dresden , Research Associate, DFG-project “Zivilisierung der Gewalt? Eine kritische Sekundäranalyse vormoderner Quellengrundlagen” |
| 2013, 2016 | TU Dresden , bachelor’s degree in history, sociology and political science; master’s degree in history |

Main Research Interests

History of Violence | History of Crime and Criminal Justice | Digital History
Seigneurial Regimes in the Holy Roman Empire

Selected Publications

Interpersonelle Gewalt und gesellschaftlicher Wandel. Lancashire 1728–1830 (Konflikte und Kultur 42), München 2023.

Vom Tatort vors Gericht. Mündlichkeit und Verwaltungsschrifttum in englischen Gerichtsakten des 18. Jahrhunderts, in: Häberlein, Mark/Flurschütz da Cruz, Andreas (Ed.): Die Sprachen der Frühen Neuzeit. Europäische und globale Perspektiven (Frühneuzeit-Impulse 6), Köln 2024, 419–429.

Lethal Violence in Decline? A Critical Review of Historical Homicide Rates in England, in: Crime, Histoire & Société 25, 2 (2021), 33–57.

Hard Numbers? The Long-Term Decline in Violence Reassessed. Empirical Objections and Fresh Perspectives, in: Continuity and Change 36, 1 (2021), 1–32 (together with Gerd Schwerhoff, Alexander Kästner, Wiebke Voigt).

Co-Editor of the Münster Glossary on Legal Unity and Pluralism, Münster 2021 ff.

Paper title: **Parish Politics in Eighteenth-Century Hungary**

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Why are rural communities in East Central Europe often seen as passive bystanders? The paper challenges the conventional approach by examining parish politics as a form of popular politics. The research examines how local communities established a public arena around rural Catholic parishes, and how this local political space influenced late Catholic confessionalisation. This approach connects social and church history by adapting the theory of communalism to the context of eighteenth-century Hungary.

Following the expulsion of the Ottomans from the Kingdom of Hungary in the late seventeenth century, there was an explosion in the number of new parishes, as local communities participated actively in parish matters. This resulted in the emergence of communal churches and “communalized” the process of late Catholic confessionalisation. The paper examines how local communities negotiated their initiatives with ecclesiastical, governmental and manorial authorities in eighteenth-century Hungary. The presentation will review church and government policy objectives regarding the role of parishes, and then examine, through two case studies, how these policies of powerholders have intertwined with grassroots initiatives.