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Title: *Witch-hunt in Finnmark*

Location: 70°22'09.5"N 31°05'34.8"E

When researching the witch-hunts in Scandinavia, it is easy to concur with the Swedish count Per Brahe (1602-1680) who commented on the witchcraft trials of 1668: "These people imagine a lot that is not real". When trying to find a satisfactory explanation for the stories told by the witnesses in these cases, one might also agree with county governor Gustaf Duwall (1630-1692), whose county was gripped with witchcraft hysteria in 1669: "I have to confess; the more I deal with this thing [alleged cases of witchcraft], the shadier it becomes before my very eyes".

Indeed, the subject of witchcraft is (and was) complex and absurd, but in essence it meant doing bad, or at least inconvenient, things to other people with the help of the devil. In practice this often meant that those accused to be witches were thought to have caused illness, death, crop failures and such to other people via spells, charms and amulets. Witches might also be accused of kidnapping children and flying with them to Blåkulla (home of the Beelzebub, according to folklore) to meet the devil. Sometimes, if a healer was thought to have resorted to "unnatural" means (for example, using a communion wafer as medicine), he or she might have been accused as a witch. Of course, rumours of these kinds of powers caused fear and loathing among villagers living near an alleged witch. Surely, something had to be done!

Witch hunts had been occurring in Europe since the 15th century, but the phenomenon spread to Northern Europe as late as the 17th century. Despite the tardy arrival, Scandinavia became one of the hotspots for witch hunts, joining



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ranks with other epicentres such as parts of Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Scotland, Hungary and British colonies in North America.



Here is a well-known German illustration from year 1670 depicting the Mora witchcraft trials in Sweden. The provocative and exaggerated poster may have sparked even more witch hysteria. Along with scary creatures the illustration has witches being burnt alive, that was common in Germany, but in Sweden, at this time, the tradition was to behead the witches before burning.

What prompted the witch hunts in Scandinavia at precisely that time? Possible reasons are manifold. It has been noted that the emergence of witch hunts in Northern Europe coincided with the deepening of the so-called "little ice age", a climate anomaly that kept temperatures cooler than usual in Europe during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. As inexplicably



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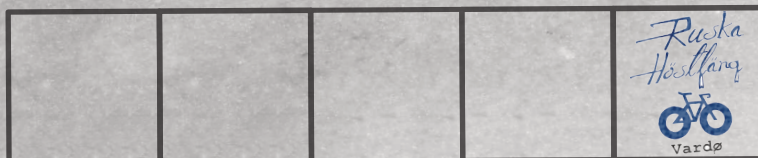
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cold weather caused crop failures and other difficulties for agrarian societies, it might have become persuasive to find scapegoats to answer for the hardships. Furthermore, religious intolerance was generally on the rise in Europe after the reformation and counter-reformation of the 16th century, which might have contributed to local populaces' thirst for persecuting anything that might be in conflict with "the true faith".

As mentioned previously, most witchcraft cases were outlandish, absurd and sometimes outright grotesque. One alleged witch was accused of causing painful wounds to his neighbours' children by cursing them, one had reputedly summoned a small magical creature, called a bjära, to help her churn butter. Ingredients for creating a bjära were thought to be, among others, a communion wafer, lengths of yarn, a piece of broom and remains of an old whip. Testimonies about travelling to Blåkulla, often given by child witnesses, provided nightmarish scenes of witches taking children with them to swear allegiance to the devil. The swearing-in was accompanied by a grotesque party, during which the children witnessed disturbing scenes of violence and sexual acts between the witches and the devil. The trip to Blåkulla was often made with a flying pig or a cow upside-down, anointed with a special cream to make them airworthy. This cream was allegedly made by the witches by boiling babies in a cauldron.

Despite sounding positively fantastical, many contemporaries of course believed that all these stories had truly taken place. Though possible reasons are many, we cannot know for sure why they believed. Possibly it has to do with the same mechanic that was and is at work with religious sects;



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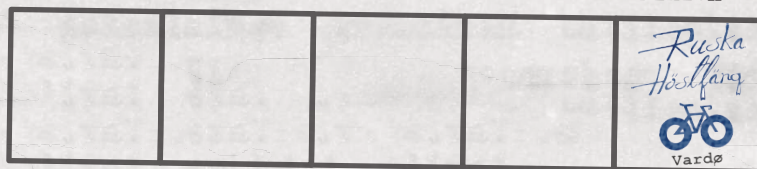
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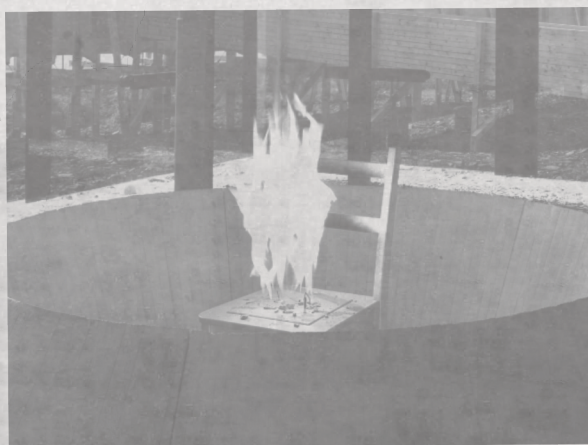
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that people tend to believe in things that others in their community also believe in. Furthermore, humans do possess a capability of reacting quite starkly and even irrationally when their children are thought to be under threat. This could explain why the alleged Blåkulla-trips with kidnapped children caused so much distress in rural villages.

Still, it must be remembered that many contemporaries were also openly sceptical of the whole affair; and scepticism steadily grew as more and more witches were tried, found guilty and executed. In most parts of Scandinavia, daily life kept running its usual pace, witch-hunts perhaps making an appearance as a faint rumour from a neighbouring county.



The Steilneset memorial has a burning chair that commemorates the victims of the Finnmark witch-hunt and witchcraft trials between 1600 and 1692. Total of 91 people, including 77 women and 14 men, were executed in the region that only had around 3000 inhabitants. Finnmark accounted for one third of all death sentences for witchcraft in Norway even though it had only 1 % of the population.

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Images:

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