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## Conrad of Marburg

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## CONFISCATIONS OF WITCHES' PROPERTY

Skeptics have long believed—or rather, assumed—that “by the beginning of the seventeenth century, witchcraft had developed into a vested interest and an industry” (Robbins 1959, 15). In other words, confiscating the property of people condemned for witchcraft made witch hunting profitable for many European governments and thus provided an economic explanation for witch hunting. However, such skeptics never bothered to demonstrate this theory from the abundant financial evidence about witch hunts. The question was first investigated a generation ago for the largest witch hunts of southwestern Germany (Midelfort 1972, 164–178), with unexpected results.

In the laws of the Holy Roman Empire, where the vast majority of witchcraft executions occurred, confiscation was always problematic and almost never implied that the entire estate of someone executed for witchcraft went to the state. Of the twelve districts in southwestern Germany that executed the most witches, three never practiced confiscation. The two largest witch hunts, however, occurred in places that did: Ellwangen and Mergentheim. Large samples show clearly that both governments actually confiscated only a small share of the witch's estate; at Mergentheim, the average was only one-seventh (14 percent), and over half of all confiscations cost the dead person's heirs less than 10 percent of the estate. Similar investigations have been rare, but about a thousand scattered instances of confiscation in the rich fiscal records of the duchy of Lorraine essentially confirm these findings: the government's major goal was to recover the costs of a witch's trial and execution, if possible, without impoverishing the heirs. In a half-dozen instances where exceptionally wealthy people were burned as witches, thus guaranteeing a profit for the government, the duke of Lorraine simply awarded the windfall spoils of their confiscations to minor courtiers.

Outside the Holy Roman Empire, the Spanish Inquisition routinely practiced confiscations of personal property for anyone convicted of heresy. Especially in its early years under Ferdinand and Isabella, there were

numerous complaints that it deliberately targeted the richest converted Jews (often dead people) to confiscate their assets from their heirs. However, the Spanish Inquisition ordinarily exempted convicted witches from this provision. On one significant occasion, at Logroño in the Basque region (1609–1611), a tribunal petitioned successfully for the right to confiscate property from convicted witches. Four years later, Logroño's records revealed that the cost of the operation had been almost three times greater than the receipts; only three of seventy-seven convicted witches had enough personal property for confiscation to exceed trial costs, and over half of them left absolutely nothing that could be confiscated (Henningsen 1980, 381). It seems that confiscations proved unprofitable for witch hunters in systems using inquisitorial rather than accusatory procedures, which provided the vast majority of Europe's witchcraft trials.

WILLIAM MONTER

**See also:** BASQUE COUNTRY; GERMANY, SOUTHWESTERN; HISTORIOGRAPHY; INQUISITION, SPANISH; ROBBINS, ROSSSELL HOPE; WITCH HUNTS.

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## CONRAD OF MARBURG (CA. 1180–1233)

A merciless inquisitor operating in the Rhineland in the early thirteenth century, Conrad of Marburg's reports describing widespread Luciferan (that is, devil worshipping) heresy were accepted by Pope Gregory IX (ruled 1227–1241), becoming the basis for the pope's decretal letter *Vox in Rama* (A Voice in Rama), which described a heretical cult worshipping the Devil. This document was an important source for later ecclesiastical authorities seeking to link heresy with diabolism and devil worship, and can be seen as a precursor of later descriptions of witches' Sabbats.

In many respects, Conrad was a shadowy figure. He was certainly a priest, and he may have had some association with a religious order, possibly the Dominicans or Franciscans, although the strongest evidence now suggests a slight association with the Premonstratensians. He, however, was most likely a member of the secular clergy. He had some level of university education. While certain scholars maintain that he was a papal inquisitor, indeed the first papally appointed inquisitor in German lands, the evidence is open to possible qualification. Many scholars argue that he was an episcopally appointed inquisitor who, after 1231,

received papal sanction and approbation for his actions against heretics, but not any formal appointment as a papally designated inquisitor.

Conrad's involvement with heresy may go back to 1224. Certainly by 1227 he seems to have been directing his own investigations into heresy; that year, a letter from Gregory IX encouraged Conrad in such pursuits. In 1231, Gregory became determined to initiate more systematic inquisitions into heresy in Italy, France, and German lands. He issued a letter to Conrad giving him official papal support to proceed as an inquisitor in German lands, mainly in the Rhineland and in parts of Thuringia. As an inquisitor, Conrad's methods were remarkably extreme. He was inclined to accept any testimony, however fanciful, and he appears to have been willing to sentence to death any suspect who did not offer at least some admission of guilt. Never active against witches or sorcerers of any kind, Conrad focused instead on the Cathar and mainly Waldensian heresies that actually existed in German lands at this time. He coerced extravagant confessions of devil worship from suspects and became fully convinced of the reality of numerous Luciferan heretics in the Rhineland. Many authorities recognized Conrad's fanaticism for what it was, and his activities aroused much opposition. The archbishop of Mainz refused to accept Conrad's accounts of Luciferan cults, for example, and urged him to moderate his activity, but to no avail.

Gregory IX, however, was convinced by Conrad's reports of heretical activity. His decretal letter *Vox in Rama* of 1233, addressed to the archbishop of Mainz and bishop of Hildesheim, presented a detailed description of a heretical sect gathering in secret to worship demons who appeared in various forms, first as a giant toad, then as a gaunt, pallid man with an icy touch, and finally as a large black cat. Novices in the sect were required to kiss each of these, either on the lips or hindquarters, to renounce their faith and swear loyalty to the sect and its demonic master. The pope also described the abominable sexual orgies in which these heretics supposedly engaged. Certainly this was not the first time a connection had been drawn between such diabolism and heresy. For example, one source described a group of heretics burned at Orléans in 1022 as participating in similar orgiastic and diabolic rituals, and there were other accounts of Luciferan heresy in German and Italian lands in the thirteenth century. Nevertheless, *Vox in Rama* marked an important step in the progressive demonization of heresy in the high and late Middle Ages that culminated in the notion of diabolical witchcraft.

Meanwhile, Conrad continued to operate without any apparent restraint, and in the face of much opposition. Eventually he went so far as to accuse a nobleman, Count Heinrich of Sayn, of heresy. A synod was held at

Mainz in August of 1233 to judge this case, and the charges were dismissed. A few days later, while returning to Marburg, Conrad was murdered, possibly by supporters of the count of Sayn or others opposed to his inquisitorial activities.

MICHAEL BAILEY

**See also:** GREGORY IX, POPE; HERESY; INQUISITION, MEDIEVAL; PAPACY AND PAPAL BULLS; SABBAT; WITCH HUNTS.

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## CONTEMPORARY WITCHCRAFT (POST 1800)

Most histories of European witchcraft end with the last public witchcraft trials in the late eighteenth century. By 1800 the spread of new intellectual ideas and legislative developments led to the decriminalization of witchcraft across Europe, one of the odd exceptions being the belated repeal of the laws against witchcraft in Ireland in 1821. Yet despite the easing of educated concern over the continued existence and threat of witchcraft, the mass of the population continued to fear witches and considered them a serious threat to their lives and livelihoods.

The history of witchcraft after its decriminalization is, therefore, very much concerned with popular attempts to employ unofficial and often illegal forms of trial and punishment. Newspaper reports and legal records attest to the fact that across Europe people continued to try witches in a variety of ways, such as the water (swimming) test, which was employed quite widely in the Netherlands, Ukraine, and England during the first half of the nineteenth century. Severe physical abuse was also meted out to accused witches as a means of forcing them to remove the harmful spells they had cast. In Belgium and France the courts dealt with a number of cases of "grilling" or "burning" accused witches in or over a hearth to make them confess and "unwitch" their victims. One such event took place in Flanders in 1815 when a farmer and his wife, believing their daughter and cattle had been bewitched, seized a female neighbor they suspected, bound her, and shoved her into a fire to make her talk. Likewise in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century England, the courts dealt with many cases