

The Quantitative Scope of Witchcraft Trials in Norwegian Bohuslen 1587–1658

A Survey Based on Primary Sources

Ellen Alm

Abstract

Bohuslen belonged to Norway until 18 March 1658, when the county was ceded to the Swedes as a result of the Peace of Roskilde. This area has fallen between two stools when it comes to documenting Norwegian witchcraft trials. Swedish historians have regarded the area as Norwegian and Norwegian historians have considered it as Swedish. Until now, this area has not been investigated with regard to Norwegian witchcraft trials. This article aims to chart the quantitative scope of witchcraft trials in Norwegian Bohuslen through an empirical study of primary sources. The fluctuation and severity of the witchcraft trials will be examined, especially in comparison to witchcraft trials in Jutland and Eastern Norway

Keywords: Witchcraft trials, Bohuslen, primary sources, court records, fiscal records, Sweden, Denmark, Norway

Norwegian Bohuslen

Since historical research on Norwegian matters tends to follow today's national boundaries, the witchcraft trials in Norwegian Bohuslen have been in the shade of history. The current national border between Sweden and Norway was established in 1751. Before that time, the boundary between Norway and Sweden was more fluid, running somewhere along the Keel, the mountain range between the two countries. In Finnmark, which was close to both Sweden and Russia, the borders in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were more diffuse than further south. At that time Swedish, Russian and Danish-Norwegian authorities were all active in the same territory. This was fertile ground for conflict, being one of the reasons for the Kalmar War of 1611–1613. The border situation was probably not as unclear in Bohuslen. The roughly 150 kilometre long coastline between Svinesund and the mouth of the Göta River was called Viken in ancient times. It was a troubled area, but it had belonged to Norway ever since the reign of Harald Fairhair (c. 865-930 AD). In the Middle Ages the area was an important centre for the Union Kings of Sweden-Norway. When

Norway became part of Denmark, the area was still a theatre of war, now as a result of rivalries between the royal houses of Sweden and Denmark-Norway. Bohuslen remained a Norwegian county until the Peace of Roskilde, apart from a Swedish intermezzo in the years 1523–1532. The *len* (a “fief”, roughly equivalent to a county) was named Bohuslen (Bohuslän in Swedish) after Bohus Castle. The fortress, which began construction in 1308 by the Norwegian king Håkon V Magnusson, was expanded several times developments until it was ceded to Sweden in 1658. The fortress still dominates the town of Kungelv (Kungälv in Swedish). It is located on the northern arm of the Göta River where it divides before flowing into the sea. The southern arm of the river led into what was Swedish territory. Bohus Castle was the residence of the feudal overlord, marking Norway’s south-eastern outpost towards Sweden. In seventeenth-century sources the fife is termed “Bohus & Viken”, with Bohus referring to the southern part and Viken the northern part. People generally spoke Norwegian, had Norwegian names, and were subject to Norwegian law. Only after the county fell to Sweden was the population Swedified (Holmberg 1963). Like the other counties in Norway, it was governed from Copenhagen via lords of Danish descent. This means that witchcraft trials before 1658 in this area can be counted among the Norwegian witchcraft trials.

Swedish Witchcraft Trials

Swedish historians have mainly studied the violent Blåkulla trials that took place in central Sweden in the years 1668–1676. The source material for these and later trials has been investigated from different points of view and covering different time spans (Ankarloo 1984; Lagerlöf-Génétay 1990; Sörlin 1993; Oja 1999; Östling 2002). The Blåkulla trials started in Älvdalen in the north and spread like wildfire through Sweden. The trials came to an end in Stockholm, by this time about 300 people had been executed.

For the witchcraft trials in Bohuslen, the years 1669–1672 have been thoroughly studied. The area had by then become Swedish but was still subject to Norwegian law.¹ The first study elucidating the witchcraft trials in Bohuslen 1669–1672 came as early as 1918. Through extensive archival studies, the professor of church history Emanuel Linderholm gave a detailed account of the course of the witchcraft trials during this period (Linderholm 1918). After Linderholm, relevant court records from the same trials were edited by the local historian Lars Manfred Svenungsson in a comprehensive source publication (Svenungsson 1970).² More recently, the historian Göran Malmstedt studied the material again from the perspective of the history of mentalities (Malmstedt 2018). He has focused on the underlying conceptual world and the perception of reality that made the witchcraft trials possible.³

The Witchcraft Trials in Bohuslen under Swedish Rule 1669–1672

The wave of witchcraft trials that swept over Bohuslen from 1669 to 1672 was extremely brutal. It is still shocking reading to see a judicial system on the wrong ideological track. The order to eliminate witches in Bohuslen was issued in August 1669 by Queen Eleonora's regency government during the minority of Carl XI. The governor of Bohuslen, Harald Stake, ordered his officers to intervene against crimes of witchcraft in the region (Svenungsson 1970:13). In the style familiar from the Blåkulla trials, and unlike the Norwegian approach to witchcraft trials, itinerant commissions of inquiry were set up, involving the active participation of local bailiffs, judges, and clergymen. The eradication of witches in Bohuslen in 1669–1672 is a horrific example of a judicial system that uncritically, even by the legal standards of the time, gave credence to accusations provoked by groundless rumours, gossip, and quarrels in local communities. The representatives of the court worked with devastating efficiency. There was extensive use of pressure, coercion, trial by water, torture, and feigned executions.

Vague suspicions and formal accusations from local people concerning *maleficium* were quickly transformed in court into accusations of devil worship. The result was chain trials with many people charged and resulting in many deaths. Malmstedt shows a total of 63 people who were brought to court. Only 7 or 8 people were formally accused by locals. The rest entered the judicial system as a consequence of charges pursued by the authorities (Malmstedt 2018:47–49). When this wave was over, 28 people had been executed and 17 died as a result of their treatment in prison. The rest received other penalties and only 12 were acquitted (Svenungsson 1970:327–329; Malmstedt 2018:43, 47, 52–53, 205–206).⁴ The historian Per Sörlin has suggested that the harsh intervention can be explained as an overreaction precisely because of the county's newly acquired status as Swedish (Sörlin 2006:135). At the same time, it is natural to think that the action against witches in Bohuslen may have been stimulated by the ongoing Blåkulla trials in central Sweden. Based on individual statements that were heard during these trials, several Swedish historians have assumed that witchcraft trials had also taken place in the area before this. However, the number and form of these have been uncertain.

Assumptions about Witchcraft Trials in Norwegian Bohuslen

The only study seeking to concretize witchcraft trials in Bohuslen under Norwegian rule is a popular article from 2021 by the historian Helene Carlsson on the website of Bohusläns Museum.⁵ She refers to specific pages from the court records in Kungelv. She has also had access to transcripts of the county fiscal records in private ownership.⁶ In the Norwegian era she

writes about four witchcraft trials in 1629 and notes that at least 13 witchcraft trials were held in the 1620s, without further specification. Three of the four witches from 1629 are widely known because of information in the court records from 1669–1672. Two of these were witches who were executed in Kungelv in 1669 whose mothers had been burned at the stake forty years previously for witchcraft in the same place. A third who was also executed in Kungelv in 1669, had a mother or grandmother or aunt in Marstrand who had previously been executed for sorcery. The date of that execution is unknown (Svenungsson 1970:91).⁷ On adjacent pages in the judgement book for the year 1629 a fourth woman appears. These four witches are the subject of an exhibition in the tower “Father’s Hat” in Bohuslen Fortress.⁸ The court records from 1669–1672 also mention that some of those accused of witchcraft in Marstrand who were now in their fifties, sixties, or seventies had parents and ancestors who were either suspected of or burned for witchcraft (Svenungsson 1970:19). These ancestors are so far anonymous, but it is hoped that they will be identified through this study.

Did Witchcraft Trials Fluctuate in Norwegian Bohuslen as Witchcraft Trials Did in Jutland and Eastern Norway?

When witchcraft cases from the Norwegian era point to events in the 1620s, it has been speculated that the witchcraft trials in Norwegian Bohuslen may have followed a pattern of fluctuation similar to that seen in Jutland and Eastern Norway. It is natural to envisage some connection in view of the geographical proximity of the areas to each other and the extensive mobility that existed through fishery, trade, and military activities (Johnsen 1905; Holmberg 1963). In Jutland and Eastern Norway, witchcraft trials were concentrated in the years 1617/19–1625 (Johansen 1991:41; Knutsen 1998:29). This was then followed by a sharp fall in the number of trials, which remained low for the rest of the century, with the exception of a few brief clusters after mid-century. It was also during this specific period that mortality was highest in connection with the witchcraft trials. The historian Jens Christian V. Johansen has shown that 60 per cent of the death sentences in Jutland came in the years 1617–1625 (Johansen 1991:41–46). Similarly, the historian Gunnar W. Knutsen has found that 67 per cent of the death sentences in Eastern Norway fell within the period 1619–1625 (Knutsen 1998:29). The accumulation of witchcraft trials in the early 1620s is viewed by both historians as a result of the implementation of the new witchcraft decree of 12 October 1617. The decree, which was applied throughout the Danish-Norwegian kingdom, emphasized that sorcery was a diabolical crime. It ordered the authorities to be vigilant in prosecuting such offences. It remains to be seen whether the witchcraft trials in Norwegian Bohuslen show a similar pattern of development.

Problems concerning the Sources

The statistics for witchcraft trials in Norwegian Bohuslen that will be presented here are inextricably linked to the nature of the sources. Since witchcraft trials were formal court cases, it is natural to seek information about them in documents that produce this type of information, namely the county's fiscal records and court records.⁹ In the accounts there is an entry labelled *sakefall*. Under this heading the bailiffs had to list revenue from fines and income from the sale of property confiscated from criminals. Also listed here are expenses in connection with court cases, imprisonment, and execution. The court records should ideally document everything that took place in court. If the series of court records and accounts were complete, we would have a very reliable survey of witchcraft trials. This is rarely the case.

Fiscal Records for Bohuslen before 1658

The physical account books for the county of Bohus and Viken are kept in the National Archives in Copenhagen (Rigsarkivet, RAK) but can be read online.¹⁰ They cover the entire county and are grouped together to cover two or three years at a time, for example "Baahus og Vigen 1619–1622". The fiscal records have been given new covers by the National Archives and the covers are numbered as "books". Some of the combined accounts may nevertheless have two covers with the same book number. The series of accounts up to 1658 consists of 35 book numbers, but in practice they consist of far more "books".¹¹ Although the fiscal records for the county start in 1587, there are large gaps up to 1601. We have records of income and expenditure for court cases for the years 1601–1605, but then there is a lacuna until 1609. From that year, the records appear to be largely continuous. An impressive number of appendices have been preserved. Appendices provide somewhat more detailed information about the reason for a fiscal transaction than the brief notices in the entry itself. For some convicted witches, however, the appendices are missing. It turns out that the entries for fines are not always consistent in documenting witchcraft cases. Witches who are not mentioned here have been found as indirect information in the feudal lord's own accounts for Bohus Castle. The information is recorded under the heading "Uncertain expenses in several respects" and was entered when the bailiffs demanded reimbursement for expenses they had incurred in connection with imprisonment and executions. Why witchcraft trials are sometimes not recorded as expenditure under the case accounts is uncertain. The accounts for Bohuslen tend to give an idea of witchcraft cases that entailed considerable expenses for the bailiffs, often the costly cases that involved flogging or the death penalty. The less serious cases that involved more modest expenses, as for instance when witches were chased out of the town, those who were shamed in church and publicly, or those who were

acquitted, will thus not be found here. But both the serious and the minor witchcraft cases ought to be captured in the court records as long as they were brought to trial. But are they?

The Court Records for Bohuslen before 1658

While the fiscal records may appear to be fairly well preserved, the situation for the court records is the reverse. Only two judgement books survived. They are from the town court and municipal authority of Kungelv. The town court (*rådhusretten*) was the court of first instance in a town.¹² There were otherwise five jurisdictional districts connected to the lower courts (*sorenskriveri*) in Bohuslen, in addition to the market towns of Marstrand (the largest), Kungelv, and Uddevalla, which were separate jurisdictions (Linderholm 1918:75; Johnsen 1905:195, 246). This means that we lack court records from the judicial administration in the rest of the county. Nor are any records from the court of appeal (*lagting*) preserved. There were two courts of appeal, Bohus and Viken, which were served by the same judge (*lagmann*) (Linderholm 1918:75). The witchcraft trials attested in court records therefore only reflect trials in the town of Kungelv. The different preservation situation for the fiscal accounts and the court records may be due to the fact that accounts were sent to Copenhagen for audit and remained there. The court's judgement books were archived in the feudal lord's castle or by local recorders (Thime 2019: 32ff). It may be that the county's court records were already lost during the Norwegian evacuation in 1658, when the entire castle archive was torched and burned down.¹³

Fortunately, the two preserved court books cover a longer period of time, 1615–1629 and 1629–1651.¹⁴ The original books are stored in the Regional Archives in Gothenburg.¹⁵ They are digitally accessible through a paywall at “ArkivDigital” to be read online.¹⁶ Both books were restored in 1991.¹⁷ The restoration appears to have been carried out in the old-fashioned way by taking the pages apart. They were then cleaned, cut and patched with washi paper. Then they were bound again and given new running pagination with modern stamps on each odd-numbered page. Since the original pagination has been cut away, it is impossible to detect lacunae by following the page numbers. The content can only be checked by reading it. It was probably in the binding process that, for example, a witchcraft case from 1629 ended up in the year 1618, but for the most part the dates in the books follow the correct chronological order. The first book from 1615 to 1629 appears to have documented the town's weekly court sessions for each year. The second book for 1629–1651 is deficient. From about 1638 there are gaps of weeks and months. Later, the records for each year consist of just 1–10 written pages concerning a small number of cases. The last entry is for 10 February 1651. It must be assumed that the judgement book is bound

from the fragments that have been preserved.

Several aspects of the court records are problematic. The books from the Kungelvv court are written in a steady, clear Gothic hand. There is exceptionally generous space between the cases that are recorded. There are few crossings-out, corrections, or additions. This neatness arouses suspicion. Court proceedings (interrogation, presentation of evidence, summary points) noted down *in situ* often tend to be written in haste, with words crossed out and inserted. In 1633 the authorities felt obliged to curb the practice by which recorders first wrote on loose sheets during the actual court proceedings and then entered the information neatly into the judgement book. Judges and recorders were ordered to keep a numbered court book “and in it write all the business that is conducted, judgements, testimonies and other court proceedings, and not write in court on other or loose paper and then make a fair copy at home”.¹⁸ The bad habit of writing on loose sheets persisted. The law remained, in 1687 with the addition that “the sheets and pages shall also be filled, and no space shall be left vacant in which anything might be added”.¹⁹ In connection with the study of witchcraft cases in Finnmark, several notes have been found with detailed information from court proceedings written on loose sheets (Hagen & Sparboe 1998:37–40). The loose sheets and judgement books belong to different archives.²⁰ When the records on loose sheets and the books were compared, it turned out that the recorders did not consistently enter all the cases noted on loose sheets into the book. The scribe thus made a selection of which cases to enter into the judgement book. The historian Per Sörlin assumes that a similar practice also applies to the court records for Härjedalen and Jämtland, but there the preliminary notes are lost (Sörlin 2016:XXXIV). Judging by the neat script and the ample space between the entries in the Kungelvv court books, there is reason to believe that these too were copied from loose first-hand notes and not written *in situ*. An indication in the same direction is that there are other types of court cases where the first record already notes the decision of the court that occurred up to two months later.²¹ This is done in continuous text, not as an inserted addition. The scribe thus knew the outcome of the case when he first entered it into the judgement book. If it is correct to assume that the judgement book for Kungelvv was written on the basis of loose notes, it may mean that some witchcraft cases may for one reason or another have been omitted by the scribe.

Another aspect of the judgement books is the quality of their records of the witchcraft cases that have been entered. They appear highly summary in form, with nowhere near the wealth of information in the records of the witchcraft trials of 1669–1672. In some instances it is impossible to obtain a clear idea of what the alleged crime involved, how the trial proceeded, and the identity and number of the people accused. This problem applies in particular to the serious witchcraft cases, where there must originally have

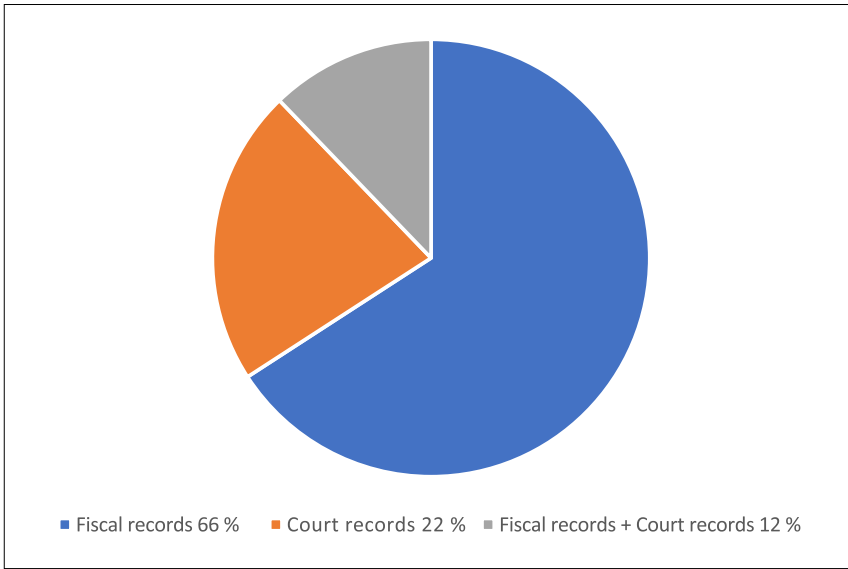


Figure 1. Witchcraft trials in Bohuslen documented in court records and fiscal records 1587–1658, broken down by the different types of sources.

been long texts recording the court proceedings. We are thus faced with a situation where it must be assumed that the scribe in Kungelöv not only made a selection of which cases to enter into the judgement book, but also a selection of how much information was to be included. From this we know that the judgement books have certain weaknesses that affect their reliability in documenting witchcraft cases.

How Reliable are the Sources in Documenting the Number of Trials?

We have documentation of 41 witchcraft trials in Bohuslen, as listed at the end of this article. The witchcraft trials are broken down by the different types of sources in Figure 1.

The chart shows that it is the fiscal sources that, naturally, record the most cases. They cover the entire course of the trials and they capture witchcraft cases from the whole county. How reliable are the fiscal sources in providing a good picture of the number of cases? Would the number of witchcraft trials be increased if more court records were preserved? Witchcraft trials in Kungelöv from 1615–1651 (1655²²) may be suitable as a basis for comparison. From this town there are preserved court records and fiscal records. In Kungelöv a total of 16 witchcraft trials can be documented, distributed among the different source types as shown in Figure 2.

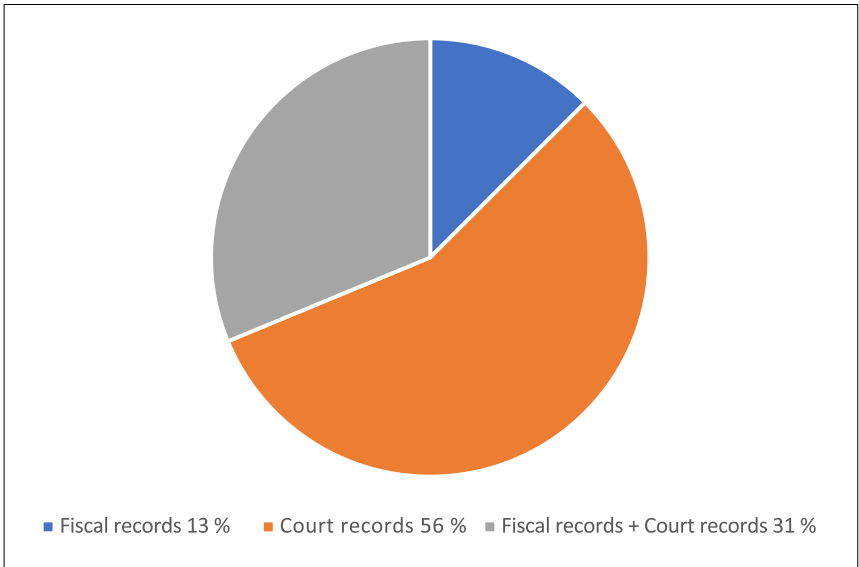


Figure 2. Witchcraft trials in Kungelöv, percentages attested in court records and accounts 1615–1651 (and from 1655 in a unique extract in a Swedish judgement book).

In the town of Kungelöv, nine cases can be found only in the court records, two cases can be found only in the fiscal records, and five cases are documented in both fiscal records and court records. Now the distribution of the witchcraft trials in the sources is the reverse of what we saw in Figure 1. It is the court records that document the most witchcraft cases, including acquittals, people who fled justice, and people who were given non-capital punishments. In Kungelöv all the serious cases were included in both the fiscal and the court records, apart from one execution that is found only in the fiscal records (in 1630).²³ We may therefore assume that if the court records from the whole county had been preserved, we would have been able to document more witchcraft cases in Bohuslän. It is especially the less serious cases that we lack when there are no court records. This means that the sources that have been preserved are unlikely to give us the full picture of the quantitative scope of the witchcraft trials. The number presented here must be regarded as a minimum figure. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that the sources show a tendency in development of the trials that can serve as a starting point for further examination.

The Fluctuation of Witchcraft Trials in Bohuslän 1587–1658

One question of interest is whether the 41 witchcraft trials in Bohuslän followed a pattern of fluctuation similar to that in Jutland and Eastern Norway.

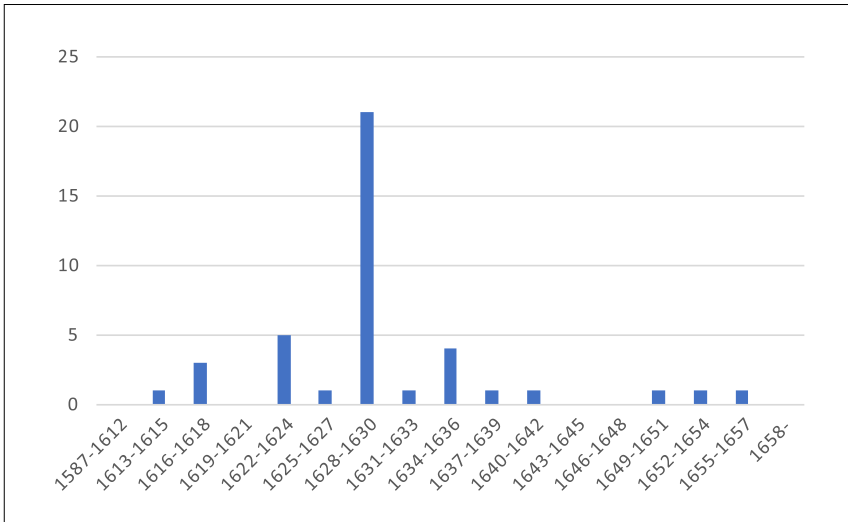


Figure 3. Fluctuation in witchcraft trials in Bohuslen by three-year intervals.

Did the 1617 decree lead to a rapid increase in the number of trials, as observed in Jutland and Eastern Norway? It is clear from the court records for Kungälv that the 1617 decree was proclaimed at the court on 12 May 1618.²⁴ It was probably spread to the rest of the county at about the same time. The fluctuation of witchcraft trials in Bohuslen is shown in Figure 3.

Although we have sources from 1587 onwards, the first witchcraft trial does not occur until 1615. From that year until 1617 there were four witchcraft trials at different places in the county. From the proclamation of the witchcraft decree in Bohuslen in 1618 until 1625, five trials for witchcraft were held. They took place in Marstrand, concentrated in the years 1623–1624. They probably concern the ancestors of the aforementioned witches in Marstrand, who were in their fifties, sixties, or seventies during the Swedish trials in 1669–1672. It is possible that the witchcraft decree may have played a role in this local prosecution of witches in the market town of Marstrand. But the time span from 1618 to 1623 may seem somewhat long. The trials in Marstrand may also have been a contagious reaction to ongoing witchcraft trials in Jutland and Eastern Norway, which were now in their most intensive phase. However, what we see is not an immediate and striking increase in the number of witchcraft trials after the issuance of the witchcraft decree, of the kind observed in Jutland and Eastern Norway.

The great concentration of witchcraft trials in Bohuslen occurs somewhat later, more specifically in the years 1628–1630. In these three years alone, 21 out of 41 witchcraft cases were tried. They make up 51 per cent of the trial material. Ten of these cases took place in Kungälv, while the rest occurred

in different places in the county. This may suggest that we are dealing with a general escalation of witchcraft trials in Bohuslen. Subsequently, the number of trials falls rapidly and levels out during the rest of the studied period. The ten witchcraft trials that took place after 1630 seem like isolated events. For much of the 1640s, for example, there were no trials. We know, however, that this levelling of the curve was not constant. Another huge wave of witchcraft trials came in 1669–1672, but this time under Swedish rule.

The Bohuslen witchcraft trials do not follow the same pattern of development as those in Jutland and Eastern Norway. One exception is the local trials in Marstrand, which fall within the same period as those in Jutland and Eastern Norway. It is a later development in Bohuslen with a high concentration in the years 1628–1630. However, there is a common denominator in that all three areas witnessed numerous witchcraft trials in the 1620s. The period from the implementation of the witchcraft decree in Bohuslen in 1618 to the high-intensity phase in 1628 seems in every respect to have been too long for the proclamation of the decree itself to explain this development. The explanation should probably be sought elsewhere in the historical context. However, the fluctuation pattern in Bohuslen shows yet another similarity to the trials in Jutland and Eastern Norway. There is a prolonged levelling off after the high-intensity phase.

The Proportion of Serious Cases

The fluctuation in the frequency of witchcraft trials nevertheless does not show how dangerous it was to be accused of witchcraft in Bohuslen. The word “dangerous” here means the willingness of the court to impose the death penalty for witchcraft. The investigation can document 24 people who lost their lives due to witchcraft charges, either as a result of legitimate judicial proceedings or as a result of torture and/or suicide before the trial ended. The 24 dead include one person who received a death sentence but died before the execu-

tion could take place, and three people who hanged themselves in prison. The four who died before the trial was over were subjected to torture.²⁵ In connection with the witchcraft trials, expenses were listed for the purchase of a rack, shears, and twine to be used to torture the accused. This information can be found in the accounts for 1623 in Marstrand²⁶ and 1629 in Kungeliv.²⁷ Table 1 is a specification of the outcome of the witchcraft trials.

The 24 deaths correspond to 58.5

Outcome	Number
Executed/Burned	20
Died in prison	1
Suicide in prison	3
Outlawed	1
Banished and/or whipped	6
Other, non-capital punishment	1
Fine	5
Acquitted	3
Escaped from prison	1
Total	41

Table 1. Outcomes of witchcraft trials in Norwegian Bohuslen.

per cent of the accused. If the four unfinished cases are excluded, the 20 executions make up 49 per cent of the accused. This seems like an unusually high death rate. In reality, it was probably not so high because the less serious cases are under-represented in the source material from Bohuslen. The witchcraft trials in Eastern Norway have been studied on the basis of fairly similar sources, mainly fiscal records and fragments of court records (Næss 1982:28–30; Knutsen 1998:6). The death rate among those accused in Eastern Norway is estimated at 36.5 per cent (Knutsen 1998:22). Yet the Eastern Norwegian material is subject to the same reservation that the less serious cases may be under-represented, and that this estimate may be too high. In Jutland the witchcraft trials have been studied on the basis of much richer source material (court records) than those in Bohuslen. The Jutland material provides a better basis for reliable figures for the number of people who were executed and how many received other punishments or were acquitted. Johansen has found that 49.6 per cent of the accused were executed (Johansen 1991:15, 43). The nature of the sources in Bohuslen makes it difficult to arrive at a reliable estimate of how many death sentences were passed in relation to milder sentences. The figure is probably somewhere between the percentage estimated here and Næss's calculation. Næss believes that about 20–25 per cent of those accused of witchcraft in Norway were executed (Næss 1982:372).

Because the sources tend to show only the serious cases, however, we can say something about *when* it was most dangerous to be accused of witchcraft in Bohuslen. Do the years 1617/19–1625 stand out as particularly dangerous, as in Jutland and Eastern Norway? The outcome of the trials in Bohuslen as distributed over time is shown in Figure 4.

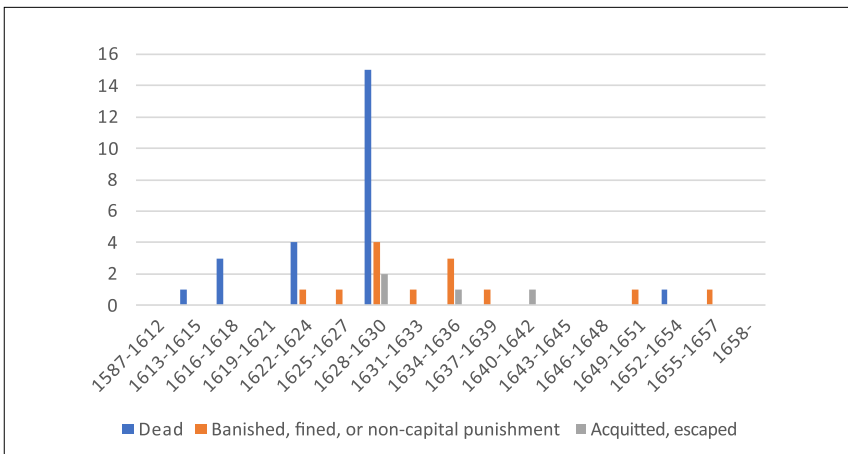


Figure 4. Outcomes of witchcraft trials in Bohuslen by three-year intervals. Blue: Died.

The sources show that virtually all death sentences were passed before 1631. That year marks a watershed between the serious and the less serious witchcraft cases. Executions appear in the sources from 1615. The first death sentences were passed at various places in the county. From the year 1615 there is therefore reason to believe that the judicial system took the crime of witchcraft seriously. Those executed in the years 1623–1624 concern the aforementioned witches in Marstrand. By far the most intensive phase in which witchcraft trials led to death sentences came in 1628–1630. It was during this short period of time that 62.5 per cent of witchcraft trials with fatal outcomes took place (15 out of 24). The many executions in 1628–1630 occurred both in Kungelöv and elsewhere in the county. Several accused people from out of town were also transported to Bohus Castle to be interrogated and executed. As we have seen, instruments of torture were purchased for this purpose. Overall, this may indicate that we are dealing with a witchcraft panic that erupted at several places in the county in 1628–1630, but with a particular concentration around the town of Kungelöv and Bohus Castle. In any case, it can be concluded that when it comes to serious witchcraft cases, we once again see a delayed development in Bohuslän in relation to Jutland and Eastern Norway.

A Distinct Watershed in 1631

Another striking observation arises from the material. There is a great difference in the types of cases that came before the court before and after 1631. The cases before 1631 mostly concerned *trolldom* or sorcery. The cases after 1631 was all about *signeri* or the use of non-harmful “white magic”. White magic concerned use of popular healing, divination, love-magic and involved incantations and the recitation of Christian-like prayers. The 1617 decree prescribed the death penalty for *rette trollfolk*, “proper sorcerers” while white magicians were to be banished and their clients fined. Only one witchcraft case after 1631 concerned both white magic and sorcery and the man responsible was executed.²⁸ When we find that virtually all the serious cases occurred before 1631, it cannot be ruled out that the issuance of the witchcraft decree led the courts to pass harsher sentences for crimes of sorcery throughout the 1620s. At the same time, we have seen that this was a



Bohus Castle, where the accused witches were imprisoned and several of them committed suicide during the trials in 1629.

trend that started as early as 1615, before the proclamation of the witchcraft decree in the county.

The type of trials seen in the source material after 1631, and the leveling off in the frequency of trials is distinctive. It leads us to wonder why no more serious cases occurred in the county. Belief in the evil forces of sorcery was far from abandoned. In a legal sense, there was no reason why the court should take witchcraft any less seriously than before. The witchcraft decree of 1617 was highly effective. In a witchcraft trial in 1636 the decree was read aloud in full to a woman who was banished for using white magic.²⁹ The decree was even published in revised language in Christian IV's great resolution (*recess*) of 1643.³⁰ The reasons for the milder character of witchcraft trials after 1631 deserve further study. A sheer guess, based on statements recorded in disputes brought before the Kungelöv court in 1629, could be that far more than the documented sorcerers were charged with witchcraft, even including people with ample resources.³¹ It has previously been shown that when witchcraft charges were levelled against the better-off, it could trigger troublesome counter-suits in the form of charges of defamation and legal criticism of the procedural methods that had allowed innocent people to be accused of witchcraft. If the criticism prevailed, it could have led the court to exercise more caution when dealing with crimes of witchcraft. Serious witchcraft trials could even cease, either permanently or temporarily (Alm 2014).

Conclusion

This study has sought to document the quantitative extent of witchcraft trials in Norwegian Bohuslän, based on a study of primary sources. The investigation has found that 41 people were accused of witchcraft. Certain weaknesses in the source material are problematized, which means that this number must be regarded as a minimum figure. The sources tend to record the serious witchcraft cases while the less serious ones are probably under-represented. The documentation may nevertheless show a tendency in the material analysed here. A key question has been whether the overall trend of the trials followed the fluctuation pattern observed in Jutland and Eastern Norway. The investigation has found that there are certain similarities to Jutland and Eastern Norway. Among other things, most of the witchcraft trials took place in the 1620s, followed by a steep drop throughout the time Bohuslän belonged to Norway. Nevertheless, the development in Bohuslän lagged behind Jutland and Eastern Norway. Witchcraft trials were at their most intense and most severe in Jutland and in Eastern Norway between 1617/19 and 1625, whereas in Bohuslän the years 1628–1630 stand out with their high concentration of witchcraft trials and serious outcomes. The witchcraft decree of 1617 was proclaimed in Bohuslän in May 1618.

The long-time span between 1618 and 1628 makes it difficult to see the period with a high concentration of witchcraft trials in Bohuslen as being directly related to the implementation of the decree. A possible exception is the small cluster of local witchcraft cases in the market town of Marstrand in the years 1623–1624. These witchcraft trials may also have been a contagious reaction to the witchcraft trials in Jutland and Eastern Norway, which were in their most intensive phase at that time. It was most dangerous to be accused of witchcraft in Bohuslen before 1631. Virtually all the death sentences came before that year. The year 1631 marks a distinct watershed in other respects. Witchcraft trials before 1631 mostly concerned “sorcery.” Witchcraft trials after 1631 concerned the use of white magic, which did not carry a death penalty.

The investigation shows that the brutal Swedish witchcraft trials in the years 1669–1672 were not unique events in this part of the country. It has provided concrete answers to speculation about Norwegian witchcraft trials arising from the material on the Swedish cases. Despite the answers that have emerged here, other questions remain unanswered. If the witchcraft trials were scarcely a direct result of the witchcraft decree of 1617, other explanations should be sought in the historical context. The different records and their interrelationships should also be studied in more detail. The aim of this study can nevertheless be said to have been accomplished. We now know that there were more than four plus thirteen witchcraft trials in Norwegian Bohuslen. The witches have been identified. The witchcraft cases displayed some similarities to the trend in trials in Jutland and Eastern Norway, but were also different in that they were a later development.

Ellen Alm
Historian/senior research librarian
NTNU Library, Gunnerus Library
NTNU University
S.P. Andersensvei 11
N-7031 Trondheim, Norway
e-mail: ellen.alm@ntnu.no

Appendix: Documented Witches in Bohuslen 1587–1658

1. Nordvigen 1615: A prisoner (man). Crime: not stated. Burnt. Source: (RAK) Lr. B. & V. 1614–1616 book 4. Bohus Castle accounts. Fiscal year 1614–1615. Appendix 27 (missing).
2. Søndervigen 1616: Oste Johannes. Crime: sorcery. Burnt. Source: (RAK) Lr. B. & V. 1614–1616 book 4. Bohus Castle accounts. Fiscal year 1615–1616. Appendix 47, 48.

3. Inland 1616–1617: A prisoner (woman). Crime: sorcery. Burnt. Source: (RAK) Lr. B. & V. 1616–1619 book 5[a]. Bohus Castle accounts. Fiscal year 1616–1617.
4. Søndervigen 1616–1617: Karin of Ormdal. Crime: sorcery. Executed. Source: (RAK) Lr. B. & V. 1616–1619 book 5[b]. Fiscal year 1616–1617. Appendix 2 under item E.
5. Marstrand 1623: A woman. Crime: sorcery. Burnt. Source: (RAK) Lr. B. & V. 1622–1625 book 7. Bohus Castle accounts. Fiscal year 1623–1624. Appendix 55 (missing).
6. Marstrand 1623: Ragnhild. Crime: sorcery. Banished. Source: same as above.
7. Marstrand 1624: One of “two female persons”. Crime: sorcery. Burnt. Source: (RAK) Lr. B. & V. 1622–1625 book 7. Bohus Castle accounts. Fiscal year 1623–1624. Appendix 64 (missing).
8. Marstrand 1624: The second of “two female persons”. Crime: sorcery. Burnt. Source: same as above.
9. Marstrand 1624: Maren Ole Samveigs. Crime: sorcery. Burnt. Source: (RAK) Lr. B. & V. 1622–1625 book 7. Fiscal year 1623–1624. Appendix 98 (missing).
10. Nordvigen bailiwick 1626: Oluf of Hofferød. Crime: white magic. Property confiscated, outlawed. Source: (RAK) Lr. B. & V. 1625–1627 book 8[a], fiscal year 1626–1627. Appendices 7 and 8.
11. Søndervigen, Ryer parish 1628: Birgit Tordsdatter. Crime: sorcery. Executed and burned at Bohus Castle. Source: (RAK) Lr. B. & V. 1627–1629 book 9[a]: Bohus Castle accounts, fiscal year 1628–1629. Appendix 62.
12. Søndervigen, Sundenes 1628: Karen Gundelle. Crime: sorcery. Executed and burned at Bohus Castle. Source: same as above.
13. Søndervigen, Sundenes 1628: Engelbrett Svendsen. Crime: sorcery. Executed and burned at Bohus Castle. Source: same as above.
14. Søndervigen, Sundenes 1628: Engelbrett Svendsen’s wife Eline. Crime: sorcery. Hanged herself in captivity. Source: same as above.
15. Søndervigen, Sundenes 1628: Engelbrett Svendsen and his wife Eline’s daughter Merete. Crime: sorcery. Executed and burned at Bohus Castle. Source: same as above.
16. Søndervigen, Sundenes 1628: Gundelle of Hjellemseng. Crime: sorcery. Executed and burned at Bohus Castle. Source: same as above.
17. Kungelv 1629: Gundelle Andersens. Crime: sorcery. Hanged herself in captivity at Bohus Castle. Burned *post mortem*. Source: (RAK) Lr. B and V. 1629–1631 book 10. Bohus Castle accounts, fiscal year 1629–1630. Appendix 80. TB A1a:1a: 561, 563.
18. Kungelv 1629: Eline Svend Lerris. Crime: sorcery. Acquitted. Source: TB A1a:1a: 568; TB A1a:1b: 571.
19. Kungelv 1629: Marit Folkvord. Crime: sorcery. She died the day she was to be executed. Burned *post mortem* Bohus Castle. Source: (RAK) Lr. B and V. 1629–1631 book 10. Bohus Castle accounts, fiscal year 1629–1630. Appendix 80. TB A1a:1a: 563.
20. Kungelv 1629: Birgitte Gabriels. Crime: white magic. Fine. Source: TB A1a:1a:99–100, 569–670; TB A1a:1b: 571–572.
21. Kungelv 1629: Marit Smeds. Crime: sorcery. Hanged herself in captivity. Burned *post mortem* Bohus Castle. Source: (RAK) Lr. B and V. 1629–1631 book 10. Bohus Castle accounts, fiscal year 1629–1630. Appendix 80. TB A1a:1b: 571.

22. Kungeliv 1629: Marte Møgs. Crime: sorcery. Burned at Bohus Castle. Source: (RAK) Lr. B and V. 1629–1631 book 10. Bohus Castle accounts, fiscal year 1629–1630. Appendix 80. TB A1a: 1b:572. See also bailiff’s demand for settlement for the four women TB A1a: 1b: 600.
23. Kungeliv 1629: Helge Claus Povelsen. Crime: sorcery. Swore innocence. Acquitted. Source: TB A1a: 1b: 580, 582, 686, 602.
24. Hisingen 1629: Gunnele Halvordsdatter. Crime: sorcery. Burnt. Source: (RAK) Lr. B and V. 1629–1631 book 10. Bohus Castle accounts, fiscal year 1629–1630. Appendix 81.
25. Uddevalla 1629: “Yet another sorceress”. Crime: sorcery. Executed. Source: (RAK) Lr. B and V. 1629–1631 book 10. Bohus Castle accounts, fiscal year 1629–1630.
26. Indland 1629: One of “some sorceresses”. Crime: sorcery. Executed. Source: (RAK) Lr. B and V. 1629–1631 book 10. Bohus Castle accounts, fiscal year 1630–1631. Appendix 71 (missing).
27. Indland 1629: The second of “some sorceresses”. Crime: sorcery. Executed. Source: same as above.
28. Kungeliv 1630: A sorceress. Crime: sorcery. Executed. Source: (RAK) Lr. B and V. 1629–1631 book 10. Bohus Castle accounts, fiscal year 1630–1631. Appendix 90 (missing).
29. Kungeliv 1630: Claus the weaver. Crime: sorcery. Had to burn his spell knots. Source: TB A1a: 1b:594.
30. Kungeliv 1630: Torann Sven Lossis. Crime: white magic. Banished. Source: TB A1a: 1b:596–600, 615.
31. Nordvigen, Kville 1630: Simen of Brekke. Crime: complicity. Having unlawfully housed a white magician (woman). Having purchased white magic services. Fine. Source: (RAK) Lr. B and V. 1629–1631 book 10[a]. Fiscal year 1630–1631.
32. Indland, Laksestad parish 1632–1633: Hogen the sexton. Crime: white magic. Sentenced to confiscation of property and banishment. Negotiated and bought his freedom for 50 dalers. Source: (RAK) Lr. B and V. 1631–1633 book 11[b]. Fiscal year 1632–1633.
33. Kungeliv 1634: Ingrid Ingmannsdatter, a Swedish woman. Crime: white magic. Broke out of prison and escaped. Source: TB A1a: 1b: 709.
34. Indland, Solberg and Sundø district court 1634–1635: Merete Pedersdatter of Kjelsby. Crime: white magic. Fine. Source: (RAK) Lr. B and V. 1633–1636 Book 12[a]. Fiscal year 1634–1635.
35. Kungeliv 1634: Maria, a German woman. Crime: white magic. Banished. Source: TB A1a: 1b: 714.
36. Kungeliv 1636: Marian. Crime: white magic. Banished. Source: TB A1a: 1b: 766–767, 768.
37. Kungeliv 1638: Svend the glover. Crime: complicity. Having unlawfully housed a white magician (woman). Fine. Source: TB A1a: 1b: 829.
38. Bohus Castle (Kungeliv) 1640–1641: A prisoner (man). Crime: white magic. Released from prison. Source: (RAK) Lr. B and V. 1639–1642 book 14[b]. Bohus Castle accounts, fiscal year 1640–1641.
39. Orust and Tjørn 1650–1651: Ingeborg Morten Torbiørns of Jarmand. Crime:

- purchasing white magic services. Fine. Source: (RAK) Lr. B and V. 1650–1652 book 18[b]. Fiscal year 1650–1651.
40. Nordvigen, Vette Herred 1653: Ole Hofferød from the farm of Hofferød. Crime: white magic and sorcery. Executed. Source: (RAK) Lr. B and V. 1652–1654 book 19[a]. Fiscal year 1653–1654. Unum. appendix in B. Bohus Castle accounts. Fiscal year 1653–1654. Appendix 26.
41. Kungelvä 1655: Dorotea Jonsdatter “Bryngelsdatter”, a Swedish woman. Crime: white magic. Whipped and banished. Source: P. Sörlin 1988: 265–266, 282. Extract from the Kungelvä Town Court records 27/2 1655 in Halmstad Town Court records 1663. (RAK) Lr. B and V. 1654–1656 book 20. Bohus Castle accounts, fiscal year 1654–1655. Appendix 8.

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¹ Norwegian law was maintained until 1680 as agreed in the Peace Treaty of 1658.

² Malmstedt (2018:26) nevertheless points out that the source has some inaccuracies in that the author in some places switches from verbatim rendering to reporting, and sometimes interrupts the presentation with his own comments.

³ The historian Per Sörlin has also mentioned the witchcraft trials in Bohuslän in his doctoral dissertation (1993) without analysing the topic in any depth. He is also responsible for a summary of the Bohuslän witchcraft trials in *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft*, 2006, Vol. 1:135–136.

⁴ Malmstedt has corrected the number of people executed from 29 to 28 because one woman actually survived the flogging. Malmstedt and Svenungsson have different figures for this trial material. Svenungsson cites a total of 101 accused where Malmstedt has 63. Malmstedt has only included people who were actually brought to court. Svenungsson has also included accused persons who, for various reasons, were never brought to court.

⁵ <https://www.bohuslansmuseum.se/kunskapsbanken/anklagad-och-oskyldigt-domd/> (20 October 2022).

⁶ Transcripts by Folke Almegeus, Orust. These transcripts are supposed to have been made

“roughly” 30 years ago. Personal communication.

⁷ Her relative is referred to in the source alternately as mother, grandmother, and maternal aunt.

⁸ Visited by the author in the summer of 2022.

⁹ There may be more material of interest that needs to be read in analog form in the Rigsarkivet in Copenhagen (RAK) which has not been examined. See e.g. official correspondence in *Norske henlagte saker vedr. Bohuslen 1588–1660*: M-45327, M-45328, and *Byfogdregnskaper 1588–1672*, innholder Bohuslen 1608–1624: Pakke S-1046. There may also be information in clerical archives. This study has one example showing that there may be retrospective information about witchcraft trials in Bohuslen recorded in witchcraft cases that were tried in Sweden, case 41.

¹⁰ *Regnskaber 1559-1660, Lensregnskaber: A. Regnskaber Øvrige len uden for det nuværende Danmark 1587–. A. Bo(å)hus og Vigen*: Arkivalieronline (sa.dk) (14 October 2022). Anyone interested in medieval fragments can see that a number of accounts are bound together from whole and/or partial medieval fragments. Often such fragments are discarded Catholic missals and breviaries. The accounts do not appear to have undergone any mechanical conservation.

¹¹ In this work, books that have the same number but two covers are cited as book number + [a] or [b].

¹² The town court was presided over by the leading burghers who constituted the magistrature, titled as presidents and councillors.

¹³ See the entry for Bohuslän in Wikipedia (21 October 2022).

¹⁴ Kungälv town halls and magistrat Ala:1a and Ala:1b. The next book, Ala:2, concerns the years 1658–1674 and falls outside the scope of this study.

¹⁵ <https://sok.riksarkivet.se/?postid=ArkisRef+SE/GLA/11935> (13 October 2022).

¹⁶ <https://app.arkivdigital.se/> (10 September 2022).

¹⁷ Cf. the conservator’s stamp.

¹⁸ Decree of 15 March 1633 § 3 relating to judges, bailiffs, etc. The decree remained valid as C4 recess 1643 3–19 (p. 337).

¹⁹ C5 NL 1687 1–8–3 (p. 36).

²⁰ The court records are in the archive *Sorenskriveren i Finnmark*. The draft sheets are in the archive *Fylkesmannen i Finnmark*, or the “county governor’s archives” (*amtmannsarkivet*) as it is also called. Both archives are stored in the National Archives in Tromsø.

²¹ For example, in Ala:1b: 763. One case was up in court on 29 August 1636. In consecutive paragraphs it is recorded that reconciliation was reached on 31 October the same year. Then the book continues with the next court session on 31 August. There is a similar example in the same book, p. 657.

²² See Sörlin 1988:265–266 for a witchcraft case in Kungälv that has come to light via the records of the Halmstad town court for 1663. The Halmstad records contain an extract from a lost judgement book for 1655 from Kungälv. It concerned a Swedish woman who was whipped and banished in Kungälv. She was subsequently executed in Sweden. Based on the information in this extract, she is probably one of two anonymous Swedish women recorded in the fiscal accounts for 1655 as having been whipped.

²³ Case 28.

²⁴ Ala:1a: 107.

²⁵ Cases 14, 17, 19, 21.

²⁶ Case 5.

²⁷ Case 17.

²⁸ Case 40.

²⁹ Case 36.

³⁰ C4 1643 2–28.

³¹ Indirect information in cases 19 and 20 as well as dispute case TB Ala: 1b: 615–616.