

Witch Trials in Seventeenth-Century Târgu Mureș

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Abstract The witch trials from Târgu-Mureș are typical ones and fit together with the other cases from the early modern period. We can identify the same processes and elements as historiography and ethnography had described. On the other hand, these cases are slightly different because these witch trials were less bloody than usually in the seventeenth century. In the Hungarian Kingdom, the zenith of the witch hunts was in the middle of the eighteenth century. Perhaps the intensity of witch hunts in a medium town was smaller. This paper aims to describe and analyse the witch cases from the seventeenth-century Târgu Mureș. These cases are not that remarkable, but we can gain insight into the juridical processes through them.

Keywords: Târgu-Mureș, witch trials, seventeenth-century, protocols

Rezumat: Procesele de vrăjitoare din Târgu-Mureș sunt tipice și se potrivește printre celelalte cazuri din perioada modernă timpurie. Putem identifica aceleași procese și elemente ca cele descrise de istoriografie și etnografie. Pe de altă parte, aceste cazuri sunt puțin diferite, deoarece aceste procese de vrăjitoare sunt mai puțin sângeroase ca de obicei în secolul al 17-lea. În Regatul Ungariei, zenitul vânătorilor de vrăjitoare a fost la mijlocul secolului al 18-lea. Poate că intensitatea vânătorilor de vrăjitoare într-un oraș mediu a fost mai mică. Studiul de față dorește să descrie și să analizeze cazurile de vrăjitorie din secolul al 17-lea din Târgu Mureș. Aceste cazuri nu sunt atât de remarcabile, dar prin ele putem obține o perspectivă asupra proceselor juridice.

Cuvinte-cheie: Târgu Mureș, procese de vrăjitoare, secolul al 17-lea, protocole

One of the greatest and most popular themes of the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries – in some places even of the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries – is witchcraft. Secret meetings, legends, the power of supernatural forces entered the imagination of nearly all members of society, and almost everyone believed in malevolent and evil sorcery. From North America to the Russian taiga, based on the sentences issued by ecclesiastical or secular courts, or simply by the masses, many women, men, and children had died.¹ Many reports arrived from all corners of the Christian world about witch trials in the early modern age.² These reports provide a large scale for interpretation due to the trials' length and the number of witnesses, since the bulky minutes can be examined from many approaches and viewpoints. Through these protocols recorded during the trials, we gain access to the everyday life of the period and insight into people's views on the transcendental.

Firstly, we would like to clarify whom we consider a witch and what was deemed as witchcraft. As we shall see, the simple act of preparing poisons was one of the attributes of witches, even though in that period, many people dabbled in such practices. Here we can also mention those who sometimes threatened to bewitch or curse their neighbours in the heat of the argument. Moreover, midwives who performed abortions or used their experience to cure diseases, employing unintelligible methods to the man of the age, were considered witches. Thus, we believe that every case where the word "witch" appears counts as a witch trial because even if the allegation itself was unfounded, the accusation was so severe that essentially the life of the person who could not clear themselves was in danger. At the same time, unfounded slanders were not without consequences either. A significant fine and contempt awaited those who incriminated someone without grounds.³ Contrary to other towns, the witch trials of Târgu Mureş are not that rich in material, which can, of course, be explained by the low number of sources that survived.

¹ Gábor Klaniczay, 'Boszorkányüldözés Közép és Kelet-Európában' [Witch hunting in Central and Eastern Europe] in Péter Tusor (ed.) *R. Várkonyi Ágnes emlékkönyv születésnek 70. évfordulója alkalmából* [Studies for R.Várkonyi Ágnes 70th birthday] (Budapest: Elte BTK, 1998), pp. 399–416.

² Malcolm Gaskill, 'Witchcraft and evidence in early modern England', *Past and Present*, 198/1 (2008): pp 33–37.

³ László Pakó, 'Boszorkányvadás az anyagi érdek és a bosszúvágy szolgálatában' [Witch accusation in the service of revenge and material interests] in Gábor Klaniczay – Éva Pócs (eds.) *Boszorkányok, varázslók és démonok Közép-Kelet Európában* [Witches, wizards, and demons in Central-East Europe] (Budapest: Balassi, 2014), pp. 160–161.

Witch trials in Western Europe, the Hungarian Kingdom, and the Transylvanian Principality

Ildikó Sz. Kristóf summarised in 2013 the research history of early modern witch trials, its perspectives, and possibilities. Besides describing the tasks awaiting us, she presented, in short, the history of witch hunts from their early modern institutionalisation to their eighteenth-century peak. According to Kristóf, there is a connection between witch hunts and social crises since this is how, in many cases, society tries to solve its tensions after a great affliction.⁴ In her interpretation, we can talk about three types of witchcraft: *maleficium* – the use of malevolent magic; *sortilegium* – the practice of sorcery; and *veneficium* – witchcraft dealing with poisons.⁵ In the trials that occurred in Târgu Mureş, we encounter all three types. Although not unequivocally, in the cases we will present in the following, we shall see that many women made use of sorcery, poisoning, and malevolent magic, or at least they were accused of it.

Considering that this subject is an easily identifiable and essentially universal one, trials have not escaped the attention of researchers and sourcebook publishers either. One of the largest, almost completed source publishing projects in Hungarian historiography is the publication of at least a part of the witch trials that took place in the country, broken down by counties and cities.⁶ Among these were published the trials from Târgu Mureş, too. The volume shows that we cannot talk about a considerable amount of material. It is also important to mention that the book does not deal with the town separately from Maros Seat, and it does not separate the sixteenth–eighteenth-century materials of the town and the seat protocols from each other.⁷

In Transylvania, witch trials occupy an essential role in the research of András Kiss. He devoted an independent volume to the subject, namely the sourcebook entitled *Boszorkányok, kuruzslók, szalmakoszorús paráznák* from 1998.⁸ With minor revisions, the volume was

⁴ Ildikó Sz. Kristóf, 'Boszorkányüldözés a kora újkori Magyarországon: kutatástörténet, eredmények, teendők-2013-ban' [Witch hunting in early modern Hungarian Kingdom: research history, results, new research ways in 2013] in Gábor Klaniczay – Éva Pócs (eds.) *Boszorkányok, varázslók és démonok Közép-Kelet Európában* [Witches, wizards, and demons in Central-East Europe], (Budapest: Balassi, 2014), pp.17–62.

⁵ *Ibid* p. 23.

⁶ *A magyarországi boszorkányság forrásai* [Sources of Witchcraft in Hungarian Kingdom] ed. József Bessenyei et al. (5 vols. Budapest: Balassi, 1997–2016), vol. 1–5.

⁷ *A magyarországi boszorkányság forrásai* [Sources of Witchcraft in Hungarian Kingdom] ed. József Bessenyei et al. (2 vols. Budapest: Balassi, 2000), vol. 2, pp. 117–164.

⁸ András Kiss, *Boszorkányok, kuruzslók, szalmakoszorús paráznák*. [Witches, Wizards and notorious Fornicators] (Bucureşti-Cluj-Napoca: Kriterion, 1998).

published again in 2004.⁹ It is a very varied and exciting sourcebook that places people who broke societal and moral norms at its centre. The introductory study of the volume is particularly important for the present research because, contrary to previous traditional interpretations, it places witchcraft in a different context. In historiography, witchcraft and magic were examined primarily within a religious approach, which is not a negligible viewpoint, but András Kiss draws the reader's attention to another aspect: those accused of witchcraft broke primarily not the norms of the Church but those of society. Often, as we shall see in the case of Târgu-Mureş, witchcraft involved a severe breach of norms, a threat, or a disdainful utterance.¹⁰ As Andrea Fehér aptly puts it in her study regarding eighteenth-century witch trials in Cluj, those dealing with Transylvanian trials will not encounter information about huge Witches' Sabbath gatherings or flying women.¹¹ Although witchcraft is considered a specific female crime in the literature, and indeed we mostly encounter women among the accused, witchcraft was not necessarily the most common charge in lawsuits against women. According to the research mentioned above by Andrea Fehér, only 5% of the proceedings against women in eighteenth-century Cluj relate in some way to the relatively broad concept of witchcraft.¹²

The situation of Cluj is especially interesting, and László Pakó draws attention to the unique aspects of the witch trials in this city. In his research, through the study of the lawyer György Igyártó he suggests that personal differences significantly impacted formulating witchcraft accusations in some situations. His study shows that, in most cases, the women accused of witchcraft were able to defend themselves.¹³

The multiple layers of witch trials were noticed by international literature, too. Two well-known Hungarian experts on the topic, Gábor Klaniczay and Éva Pócs, devoted a series of English-language, collections of essays to the topic, presenting examples, methodologies, and approaches from many parts of Europe, not to mention the description of the time or social space of witchcraft research.¹⁴ From the viewpoint of our research,

⁹ András Kiss, *Boszorkányok, kuruzslók, szalmakoszorús paráznák*. [Witches, Wizards and notorious Fornicators] (Cluj-Napoca: Kriterion, 2004).

¹⁰ *Ibid.* pp.15–17.

¹¹ Andrea Fehér, '„The instrument of the Devil” The Image of the Witch in 18th century Cluj', *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai Historia*, 64/1 (2019): 123–142.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 125.

¹³ Pakó, 'Boszorkányvadás', pp. 155–170.

¹⁴ Gábor Klaniczay-Éva Pócs (eds), *Demons, Spirit. Witches*, (3 vols. Budapest–New York: Ceu Press, 2008).

the third volume seems to be the most important, since we are not primarily dealing with the content and demonic issue of witch trials but rather with their course.¹⁵

Anyone could be charged with witchcraft, and even the starting point of many witch trials was a defamation case, where an old woman was called a witch for various reasons. There was an example of this in Cluj, where the first data concerning urban witch trials is about a defamation lawsuit.¹⁶ Witch trials are multi-layered and multifaceted; it seems that the presumption of a kind of malicious intent was required to prosecute witchcraft, which was usually related to another crime condemned by the society of the age.¹⁷ Existing literature discusses in great detail the differences between good and evil, bewitching, enchantment, and healing, as well as the consequences suffered by those who confessed. The consequences do not mean only the torture they faced, but how certain images of witches, the acts associated with them, leaked down into popular imagination. Although there was no such thing in popular tradition, the literature of the time, dealing with witch hunts readily made use, for example, of the image of the Witches' Sabbath, also emphasising the role of physical marks on the witches' bodies.¹⁸ Women who were considered healers by folk beliefs and real healing women, as well as people who were considered seers, could easily be charged with witchcraft, in most cases due to a failed healing.¹⁹ However, Cătălina Covaciu takes an entirely different approach in her study, examining the indicators associated with witches from a hermeneutical point of view.²⁰

In the case of Târgu-Mureș, since the protocols are incomplete, we cannot carry out quantitative research. On the other hand, it is challenging

¹⁵ Gábor Klaniczay-Éva Pócs (eds), *Demons, Spirit. Witches. Witchcraft. Mythologies and Persecutions* (3 vols, Budapest–New York: Ceu Press, 2008).

¹⁶ László Pakó- Péter Tóth (eds), *Kolozsvári boszorkányperek 1564–1773* [Witchtrials in Cluj 1564–1743], (Budapest: Ballasi, 2014), p. 49.

¹⁷ Kiss, *Boszorkányok, Paráznák*, pp. 21–23.

¹⁸ Gábor Klaniczay, 'Learned Systems and Popular Narrations of Visions and Bewitchment' in Gábor Klaniczay-Éva Pócs (eds), *Demons, Spirit. Witches. 3. Witchcraft. Mythologies and Persecutions*. (Budapest–New York: Ceu Press, 2008), pp. 50–73.

¹⁹ István Tringli, 'Bűbájos és néző asszonyok levelesítő jegyzékekben' [Magician and fortune-teller women in warrant letters] in István Tringli (ed.) *Tanulmányok a középkori magyar jogszokások és kiváltságok történetéhez*. [Studies about the medieval Hungarian privileges and legal customs] (Budapest: Line Design. 2017), pp. 28–41, especially pp. 30–35.

²⁰ Cătălina Covaciu, 'Adversarii ordinii divine? Portretul acuzatilor în procesele de vrăjitorie clujene' [Enemies of divine orders? Portraits of accused witches from Cluj] in Marius Eppel (ed.), *Magie și familie în Europa în epociile modernă contemporană* [Magic and family in the modern and contemporary Europe] (Cluj-Napoca: Mega, 2016), pp. 13–44.

to define and categorise witch trials because “witch” was a widespread curse word used primarily against old women in cases of verbal abuse. People often called someone a witch to signal their contempt and further humiliate a person. That is, conflicts arose from disputes between women. Western European research dealing with richer sources confirms this observation. In Germany, for example, as in Târgu Mureş, women were overrepresented among the accused. This is because society did not consider old women, especially poor ones, to be fully useful. Moreover, we cannot ignore the fact that the female body changes a lot over the years and that for early modern men, changes above a certain age seemed unnatural.²¹ In the case of witch trials in Germany, the richness of the source material allowed researchers to try quantitative processing. Their figures suggest that the proportion of widows is relatively high, with one-third of the women accused coming from this group. In some cases, this proportion could be around two-thirds in isolated areas.²² Western statistics also highlight that witches belonged primarily to the poorer sections of the population.²³

In some cases, where sources have made it possible, research no longer analyses only the defendants but also the accusers. Thus, we know that witch trials sometimes served a serious political purpose, such as in the 1610s, when Gábor Bethlen regained treasury estates and showcased his political strength through these trials.²⁴ Nevertheless, sometimes, witch trials, even in towns, started from personal conflicts or bribery. The life and career of the *director* from Cluj, György Igyártó, from the end of the sixteenth century, is a good example of this.²⁵ Political discrediting as a purpose can also be presumed in a case from Baia Mare, a trial against Márton Szappanos conducted from 1703 to 1705.²⁶ The height of eighteenth-century Hungarian witch hunts were the witch trials from Szeged. In the case of these trials, we have records of the event’s political motivation and the actions that witnesses had supposedly described.²⁷

²¹ Alisson Rowlands, ‘Witchcraft and Old Women in Early Modern Germany’, *Past and Present*, 171/1 (2001): 50–60.

²² *Ibid.* pp. 62–63.

²³ *Ibid.* pp. 70–71.

²⁴ Nagy, ‘Sok dolgot próbála Bethlen Gábor...’ [Gábor Bethlen tried many things...] (Budapest: Magvető, 1981), pp.139–142.

²⁵ Pakó, *Boszorkányvadások*, pp.155 – 170.

²⁶ Judit Kis-Halasz, ‘The trial of an honest citizen’ in Gábor Klaniczay-Éva Pócs (eds) *Demons, Spirit. Witches. 3. Witchcraft. Mythologies and Persecutions* (Budapest – New York: Ceu Press, 2008), pp. 213–236.

²⁷ *A magyarországi boszorkányság forrásai V.* [Sources of Witchcraft in Hungarian Kingdom V], eds Péter Tóth G et al. *Szegedi boszorkányperek 1726–1744* [Witch Trials in Szeged 1726–1744] (Budapest: Balassi 2016), pp. 15–38.

The issue of legality poses an important difference between Transylvania and Western Europe, and it sheds a different light on the question of seventeenth-century witch hunts, too. In the sixteenth century, together with the Church, secular authorities also joined the hunts; for example, in England, several laws were passed against witches – James I dealt personally with the issue of witches.²⁸ In contrast, we do not know of such provisions in seventeenth-century Transylvania, although, of course, proceedings against witches existed here.²⁹ If not very severely, Transylvanians also acted in the parliament against, for example, fortunetellers and practitioners of other diabolical sciences. Returning to the English example, several textbooks have been published for the judiciary to give those involved in the legislature even more in-depth knowledge of the machinations of witches.³⁰

In seventeenth-century Târgu Mureş, we meet witches primarily in defamation lawsuits. If someone was called a witch, that person could rightly ask the perpetrator to dwell for his deed and pay the “language fine” to the city coffers. However, if someone did not want to pay the fine, they could defend themselves by proving with witnesses that the woman, or less commonly, the man they had insulted, actually meets the broad concept of a witch. Witchcraft as a concept can be interpreted extremely broadly and varies from region to region.³¹ The Hungarian belief in witches was influenced on the one hand by some aspects of Western “literature”, on the other hand by ethnographic elements and folklore, and healing practices and ideas about possibly harmful spirits also played a significant role. Therefore, it could not have been difficult for a seventeenth-century man to find a malevolent person or even a malicious healer, as these kinds of practices were part of everyday life.³²

In addition to popular belief, the second major starting point was textbooks appearing from the fifteenth century on, intended for witch-hunters from both the Protestant and Catholic sides to guide practitioners on distinguishing folk superstition from true devilish works. By the end of a century of development, there is already abundant literature on the various cases of witches and the penalties impossible on them, providing a formal framework for folk beliefs and, in some cases, mass hysteria.³³

²⁸ Gaskill, *Witchcraft and evidence*, pp 41–43.

²⁹ Kiss, *Boszorkányok, paráznák*. pp. 22–28.

³⁰ Gaskill, *Witchcraft and evidence*, pp. 45–47.

³¹ Klaniczay, *Boszorkányüldözés*, pp. 413–416

³² Éva Pócs, ‘Tündér és boszorkány Délkelet és Közép-Európa határán’ [Fairy and Witch in the borders of Southeast and Central Europe], *Ethnographia*, 97/ 2–4 (1986): 177–256.

³³ Gábor Klaniczay, ‘Boszorkányhit, boszorkányvád, boszorkányüldözés a XVI–XVIII. Században’ [Faith in witches, accusation of witchcraft, witch hunting in the 16–18th centuries], *Ethnographia*. 97/2–4 (1986): 257–260.

On the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary, Transylvania, and the occupied lands, we cannot speak of organised witch-hunts in the seventeenth century. The Hungarian theological literature did not pay too much attention to witches either, so we cannot talk about mass, ideologically well-founded lawsuits.³⁴

The so-called wave-like, almost panic-like witch-hunts experienced in many parts of Europe have led to mass executions.³⁵ Of course, we must note that the peak of witch hunts in Hungary and Transylvania happened in the eighteenth century, and its height is represented by the series of witch trials from Szeged.³⁶

In the case of Târgu-Mureş, the current paper cannot and does not wish to engage in theories according to which witch trials are symptoms of a specific crisis, or possibly social processes started from the top. We believe that they show the belief present among the elite and other parts of society that something terrible happening in the world or someone's life is a sign of malicious intent. Furthermore, if a subject had previously threatened someone or was unwilling to perform a cure that had worked on someone else, that meant that he/she engaged in practices that broke societal norms.³⁷ Of course, spells, bewitching, shape-shifting, and other signs present in other lawsuits also appear in Târgu Mureş, but the purpose of the current paper is to present the procedure and the course of lawsuits. As these have already been published, we will not cover all witch trials. In the examples, we mostly meet women; there were more proceedings against them, which provide much more interesting information. Moreover, female witchcraft was often associated with fornication and adultery, but even a more libertine way of life was deemed suspicious during this period.

Witch trials in Târgu-Mureş

In the first decades of the seventeenth century, witchcraft rarely appeared as an indictment in the protocols; even then, we cannot talk about specific indictments of witchcraft but rather about cases of defamation. In most cases, the accused was usually a woman, which essentially corresponds to the proportions examined in the Hungarian literature.³⁸ One of the first such cases of defamation, where records cover the words spoken during the trial in more detail, was discussed on

³⁴ Klaniczay, *Boszorkányüldözés*, pp. 410–411.

³⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 404–407.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 405.

³⁷ Klaniczay, *Boszorkányhit*, p. 269.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 261.

January 24, 1625, by the council of Târgu Mureș. György Lázár's wife sued Péter Csetne's wife for spreading the rumour that her servant had given birth to a boy in Brașov with her knowledge and that the servant was a witch and together with her mistress was involved in practices, including in the disappearance of the child. The council made the plaintiff swear she did not take part in witchcraft and magic affecting the child. It seems that the council believed the plaintiff's declaration that she had only found the corpse of the boy and did not cause his death. However, the council considered that both György Lázár's wife and Péter Csetne's wife should have reported the case to the officers. The quarrelling women were both fined with 3 forints each. The court also mentioned in the *deliberatum* that it examined the case by hearing witnesses chosen by the two parties.³⁹

Witchcraft appeared in another defamation case at the hearing on September 4, 1629. Mihály Varga got into a nasty fight with the wife of István Takács. Witnesses say the reason for the quarrel was unknown; however, Varga was indeed standing in his yard, and the woman was on the street. The conflict may have been of older origin, as Mihály Varga's wife ran away with the soldier son or relative of István Takács's wife. According to the witnesses, Mihály Varga also accused Takács' wife of complicity; according to him, some kind of witchcraft also played a role in his wife's leaving (the witness did not remember the exact word the man had used). He threatened her that if she dared to put her foot in his house, he would knock out all her teeth. However, no one saw if he had finally paid off his threat.⁴⁰ We are not aware of any further developments in this case.

We encounter a much more nuanced case of witchcraft in the trial against the wife of János Falábú ['wooden legged'] and her daughter, Kata. The case could be better discussed as a fornication trial, but it fits this analysis because it illustrates the connections between witchcraft, fornication, and prostitution. The trial initially started on July 5, 1633, but the event occurred on Easter day. Two unfortunate "clients", Mihály Somosdi

³⁹ Târgu-Mureș, Arhivele Naționale [Romanian National Archives] Fondul no. 9. Arhiva Primăriei Municipiului Târgu-Mureș [Fond no. 9, Archives of municipality Târgu-Mureș], Inventar no 118: Acte administrative și juridice [Inventory no. 118, Administrative and jurisdiction documents] Dosar no. 290. f. 204v-205r.

⁴⁰ Târgu-Mureș, Arhivele Naționale [Romanian National Archives] Fondul no. 9. Arhiva Primăriei Municipiului Târgu-Mureș [Fond no. 9, Archives of municipality Târgu-Mureș], Inventar no 118: Acte administrative și juridice [Inventory no. 118, Administrative and jurisdiction documents] Dosar no. 291. f. 171r-v.

and István Csiszár started to argue in front of János Falábú's tavern. The argument turned into a bloody conflict; István Csiszár cut Mihály Somosdi with a knife. István Csiszár originally wanted to attack János Falábú's son, András Szabó, for some wine deal, but the reason was probably a love affair.⁴¹

The two "cavaliers" soon realised what actually caused the problem, and together they sued Anna Falábú and her daughter Kata with charges of fornication on September 21, 1633. The image of – in today's terms – a socially disadvantaged family of four develops before our eyes. Judging from the father's nickname, which became a family name, he was probably a disabled person who completed the family's income selling wine, but his wife was cheating on him publicly with multiple men, and most probably the place of the affairs was the tavern itself. In a previous study dealing with fornication, we mentioned Beat Kümin, who described the connections between taverns and love affairs; this case was probably no different.⁴² The daughter named Kata lived quite a libertine life – it may be because of psychic trauma, but she was involved with several servants despite her mother forbidding her to do so. From the viewpoint of witchcraft, the essential details are those that the witnesses shared regarding methods of contraception: the alleged charms and spells designed to avoid getting pregnant and how this knowledge passed on from mother to daughter.

We do not know the daughter's age during the trial, but since she was permitted to testify as a witness, we may infer that she was between 15 and 20 years old. According to witnesses, young lads had been urging her during harvest to throw away her headdress (a sign of virginity worn by young girls), and many people overheard them. The mother must have been upset about this since she called her daughter worthy of the pillory. With today's scientific knowledge, it seems pretty grotesque how Kata Falábú spoke about how men fell in love with her and how she could not become pregnant. Orsolya, the wife of János Szarvas, who was probably one of the family's neighbours or an acquaintance, declared that although the father knew about his daughter's behaviour, he could not do anything about her. We know from this testimony that when asked if she was not afraid of getting pregnant, Kata responded that she knew for sure she could not get pregnant. Her love spells included a green frog; if a lad touched it, he instantly fell in love. The wife of András Sárpataki had even overheard the practice through which Kata would stop her unwanted pregnancies. A green frog was to be put in a mug and then in

⁴¹ Ibid. 291. f. 134r-135v

⁴² Beat Kümin, *Drinking Matters. Public Houses and Social Exchange in Early Modern Central Europe* (London – New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2007), pp. 70–73.

an anthill; after a while, the mug had to be taken out, filled with wine, brought around the house, and given to the targeted man. In this case, we believe we are dealing with a distorted version of a folk love charm. According to Kata, the wife of Péter Szabó, the daughter bragged that she could not have a child from anyone but did not reveal the reason. People suspected that she touched the lads with a frog and then locked the animal in a mug with a rag.⁴³ Allegedly, she wanted to ensure that she would not get pregnant with this charm.

The trial against Anna, the wife of János Falábú, and her daughter Kata was taken up after this by the town's officers, but only fragments are known to us about the further developments of the process.⁴⁴ We know the decision of the council from October 15, 1633. In the end, the mother's promise came true, the girl was found guilty of fornication, and it was considered that she lost her foetus from natural causes. Thus, the girl was sentenced to the pillory and expulsion from the city. The mentioning of the foetus is interesting because witnesses pointed out that she said she could not get pregnant. It seems the charm remained ineffective. The verdict did not raise the charge of witchcraft. Presumably, the girl was not entirely mentally accountable.⁴⁵

The court case in which testimonies were taken on June 12, 1634, was a defamation case. The wife of Márton Veres sued Pál Szűcs because, at the fair on the occasion of the Corpus Christi, he loudly called her a whore and a witch even though the people present, according to the testimonies, were trying to calm the man down.⁴⁶

A classic witch trial was the one against the wife of György Kállai from May 31, 1639. This trial was not a private prosecution; the officers had started it (the judge and the small council members were called "officers"; they had a right like an attorney to start a process). Based on the testimonies, it seems that it concerned a simpler wise-woman who employed quite morbid methods. She charmed the father of Lórinç

⁴³ Târgu-Mureș, Arhivele Naționale [Romanian National Archives] Fondul no. 9. Arhiva Primăriei Municipiul Târgu-Mureș [Fond no. 9, Archives of municipality Târgu-Mureș], Inventar no 118: Acte administrative și juridice [Inventory no. 118, Administrative and jurisdiction documents] Dosar no. 291. f. 136r-138v.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 291. f. 141v.

⁴⁵ Târgu-Mureș, Arhivele Naționale [Romanian National Archives] Fondul no. 9. Arhiva Primăriei Municipiul Târgu-Mureș [Fond no. 9, Archives of municipality Târgu-Mureș], Inventar no 118: Acte administrative și juridice [Inventory no. 118, Administrative and jurisdiction documents] Dosar no. 290. f. 42v-43r.

⁴⁶ Târgu-Mureș, Arhivele Naționale [Romanian National Archives] Fondul no. 9. Arhiva Primăriei Municipiul Târgu-Mureș [Fond no. 9, Archives of municipality Târgu-Mureș], Inventar no 118: Acte administrative și juridice [Inventory no. 118, Administrative and jurisdiction documents] Dosar no. 292. f. 19v-20r.

Csizmadia Nagy, making him drink his own excrements, following which the “patient” went crazy and ran away. Csizmadia started searching for his father immediately, but on his way, he saw the woman in animal form several times; when returning home with his father, he saw the woman in the place where he had previously seen the animals. Besides this failed healing, the wife of Gyurka Kállai was also accused of living a sinful life. She provided shelter for several shady lads, and she was seen fornicating with them or being too cheerful in their company. The witnesses mentioned several times that the woman cooked unclean; she put her own excrements in the food, which could be noticed on the fish and the grape soup. They also mentioned that she bound some lads to herself, and if they tried to leave her, these attempts usually had tragic consequences. Barbara, the wife of Máté Nánási, heard it from Máté Prágai that in some cases, the wife of Kállai procured men for other women, too, for example for the wife of István Molnár she got a journeyman tailor. She accused the woman on the grounds of a personal tragedy, too: her son named Gyurkó died three days after he berated the wife of Kállai.⁴⁷

It seems that the wife of Kállai sometimes performed magic for the use of others, too. Anna, the wife of János Farkas, knew many of her practices: how she would take soil from the graves, scattering it around the home of her ill-wishers. This was how she used to escape from the law since she had already been caught before. However, when getting a request, the wife of Kállai would not comply with it, declaring that since she could not do any good for herself, how could she do good for others. At the same time, in at least one case, she scattered soil under the soles of lawmakers, and most witnesses mentioned that the woman fornicated a lot and cheated on her husband.⁴⁸ In this case, the *deliberatum* did not survive.

Witch trials are put in an interesting light by the trial started by Márton Baba Persa and his wife against Erzsébet, the wife of István Görög in January 1642. This is a defamation case; according to the witnesses, the man had berated the woman multiple times for not cooking “clean” and for putting different things in the food. The insinuation revolted the woman. Márton Baba Persa, to save himself, tried to prove that even if the woman was not a witch or a devilish person, at least she cooked unclean. There were many hearing rounds, but even though witnesses saw and heard the quarrels, no one could say that the woman committed anything wrong during cooking.⁴⁹ From the second hearing, it seems that

⁴⁷ Ibid. 292. f. 189r-190r.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 292. f. 190r-192r.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 292. f. 314r-v, 315r-v, 319r.

the accusations were completely ungrounded: this was how witnesses testified on May 13 and October 21, too.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, we do not have the court's decision to see entirely clearly in this matter.

On January 28 of the same year, there was another witch trial before the court from Târgu-Mureș, one against the wife of Márton Nagy. Interestingly, the proceedings were not started by the officers but by Mihály Tolnai. According to testimonies, he complained about the woman on several charges. Primarily he accused her of being a witch, blaming her for his and his wife's illness, but he also charged her with theft and fornication. According to the testimonies, the wife of Márton Nagy was a poor woman, trying to expand her income by selling some wine. She lived in many places as a tenant, but the people she lived at had a good opinion of her. In contrast, those who knew her from before, for example, Erzsébet, the wife of Imre Mészáros, said in their testimonies that, while staying in Zaláu and later in Târgu-Mureș she was a thievish whore. There was also gossip around town that she was up for sexual relations. We do not know the sentence; the accusation of witchcraft was probably just an addition. The denunciator might have also been motivated by a jealous wife, since he and the accused had previously been close, or maybe the man's pride was hurt by rejection.⁵¹

The judiciary, which was going through a transformation process, summoned Anna Márkos on May 28, 1676. Since they were worried that she would run away, she was also arrested. The accusation was represented by Gergely Tarisznya, the town director (attorney of the town; the post was created in 1672). We do not have information about the entire process since the protocols are incomplete, but at least one witness mentioned with certainty that the accused used to heal with herbs, which ultimately proved her to be a witch. The protocol does not offer details, but the woman admitted to the charges, most probably under torture; the records end here.⁵²

The protocols have preserved the complete sentence in the case started by the town's director, István Rozsnyai, against Katalin Sárdi, the wife of János Kőrösi. The decision was taken on October 6, 1682. The *deliberatum* contains the reasons for sentencing the woman to the stake. Although she confessed her crimes (probably out of fear of torture) and

⁵⁰ Ibid. 292. f. 323r-v; 292. 353r-v.

⁵¹ Ibid. 292. f. 319r-320v

⁵² Târgu-Mureș, Arhivele Naționale [Romanian National Archives] Fondul no. 9. Arhiva Primăriei Municipiului Târgu-Mureș [Fond no. 9, Archives of municipality Târgu-Mureș], Inventar no 118: Acte administrative și juridice [Inventory no. 118, Administrative and jurisdiction documents] Dosar no. 293. f. 229v.

many people testified that she was a well-known witch, the council decided to examine the case because of the many gossips and the woman's state of mind. They summarised the grounds for finding her guilty in five points. Firstly, they found under the threshold two pots: one contained a burnt mat, the other a chicken – according to the witnesses, these were pots in which she used to cook. According to the second point, she threatened the wife of Komáromi in the graveyard that she would break her neck, and the woman indeed tumbled several times in the graveyard. However, the council admits that although the injured party was not drunk when the incidents happened, it cannot be excluded that the witnesses might not tell the truth. Thirdly, János Kerekes's daughter had seen in her dream that evil creatures possessed Katalin Sárdi, tortured her, and cut her hair. The next day Katalin Sárdi herself told people at the market about what had happened to her. The fourth point explains that she was found to be devilish and witchy because of a devilish attempt at healing: during the night, at a crossroads, she attempted to heal the son of János Borbély of epilepsy by putting him in a cauldron heated by the fire started from nine spindles. These practices were not according to Christian teaching. The fifth point attributed the unclear acquittal of the wife of Majos and the wife of Pál Szűcs to her practices, too. Because there was no visible demonstration, the court considered the charge of witchcraft to be proven based on these five points.⁵³

The appeal is interesting because, according to the council, witchcraft and viciousness were not considered fully proven, yet the woman's guilt was deemed probable. However, if seven people were to take bail for her and the accused would swear on it, she would be acquitted of the charges.⁵⁴

The case discussed on July 9, 1683, in which Márton Gombási accused Zsuzsa Nyerges, wife of András Szabó, of killing his daughter in 1676 in Sighișoara with various charming methods, shows that the officials of the city were not at all bloodthirsty and proceeded prudently. The city arrested the woman and asked the Sighișoara council to call for testimonies. The council of Sighișoara and the confessions recorded in Târgu Mureș cannot prove the woman used charms and lived a 'witchy' lifestyle or that she had to do with the girl's death. However, because her lifestyle gave way for suspicions – she fornicated, aborted her pregnancies, and seemingly performed abortions, too – and since her person caused unrest among people, the council decided to expel her

⁵³ Ibid. 293. f.312v–313v.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 293. f. 315v.

from the city. On her way out, she was threatened to be beheaded if she were to be found inside the city borders again. This was a common procedure in other Transylvanian and Hungarian cities.⁵⁵

The cases presented above do not represent all the trials connected to witchcraft, but it is evident that different charms and special healing methods were available to everyone. These cases came to the attention of the authorities usually if some herbal healing did not end well or if someone was not pleased with the “service” provided. The accused women appear to have carried out their activities in public for years, yet at one point, the authorities, possibly a citizen as a private prosecutor, prosecuted them. The procedure was as thorough as possible; gathering physical evidence had already become a practice towards the end of the era, but as we can see, that did not mean complete certainty either. The court wanted to make fair decisions, so if there were not enough credible witnesses or the situation was unclear, the verdict was adjourned, the charges were amended or dropped. They only made a sentence when they were sure of their case. However, it should be emphasised that although death sentences were issued, as the above examples show, authorities tried to shed as little blood as possible; thus, they usually gave the accused a chance to escape execution. Although the crime committed by the accused would have required the death penalty, the court usually found that they had not violated the laws so many times and to such extent that the city needed to execute them, even if they had been found guilty on several points.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 293. f 317r-v; f. 318v

