QUESTIONING THE CRIME OF WITCHCRAFT
Definitions, receptions and realities (14th-16th centuries)

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
MAY 20-21, 2021, EHESS, PARIS, FRANCE
Summary:
In the last decades, the multiplications of works in the field of Witchcraft Studies made it possible to profoundly renew the approaches and the study designs of the repression of witchcraft in the late Middle Ages and in the beginning of the Early Modern Era. Consequently, research has substantially specified the methods and configurations (ideological, political and doctrinal) that contribute to the genesis of the "witch-hunt". Research also uncovered that the repression of witchcraft could take a number of different forms depending on the contexts, the spaces studied, the sources and the aims they seem to pursue. It underlines the extreme plasticity of the accusation of witchcraft and the categories of such a crime. Hence, the conference aims to focus the discussions on three main areas: the definition of the crime of witchcraft, its different receptions and the question of its reality. The goal of the conference is also to discuss the crime of witchcraft by highlighting new fields of research and unstudied sources. The variety of definitions, the modalities of reception and the different realities that the crime of witchcraft had undergone in the late Middle Ages and at the beginning of the Early Modern Era (14th-16th centuries) will be addressed and debated.

Defining the crime of witchcraft: issues, concepts and debates
Historiography has frequently emphasized the richness of the lexicon involved in medieval and early modern sources to name witchcraft and those who practice it. Such a typological abundance is to be seen in the context of the numerous areas where the repression of the crime of witchcraft expanded, starting at the end of the 13th century. The most recent work, in particular those concerning the Alpine region, the Pyrenees and the Kingdom of France, have shown the specific features and the distinctive regional identities of the vocabulary used to define witchcraft. Moreover, the crime of witchcraft appears as a criminal category with a
flexible and dynamic definition where the wording is closely tied to the studied sources. Therefore, the study of witchcraft seems to bear witness that this crime is a concept under construction and in debate at the end of the Middle Ages. If these elements are relatively understood today, a comprehensive review from a comparative perspective remains to be done. The confrontation of various terrains of study mobilizing various materials (judicial, normative, theological sources, pardons, literature, predication) and highlight different production backgrounds (laypersons, clergy, inquisition) would enable us to lead a global reflection on the modalities of the emergence of the crime of witchcraft in the late Middle Ages. It would also help us to clarify the issues of the use of a certain type of vocabulary by highlighting what is at stake depending on the different regional or political units. Finally, this comparative approach could enable to point out the modalities of diffusion and circulation of the words defining the crime of witchcraft. Therefore, it could permit us to specify the conditions of their reception and their possible influences of the repressive practices against witchcraft.

**Reception of the crime of witchcraft: between support and resistance**

Beyond its definition, a crime can be diversely received. It is clear that before the beginning the European witch hunt a notion of witchcraft preexists and differs depending on social classes or regions. It corresponds only partially with the concept of Sabbath that emerges in courts starting in the 15th century. It can be seen in the debates of theologians on the reality or fiction of nocturnal flights. It can also be seen in the denunciations generally targeting individuals instead of groups which could be perceived as acting secretly and collectively. The question of the role of the population in repression is a key element to understand the phenomenon, both in the impact of the popular perception of witchcraft, and in individual actions. If the repression of the diabolical sect could, in certain cases, be exploited by individuals to satisfy their own agenda, oppositions to the concept of Sabbath or to specific trials existed. They are generally difficult to grasp since justice is exercised by the dominant. Those who wanted to contest, to avoid an open revolt, had to accept disguised ways to dodge any sanction. Nevertheless, the study of medieval and early modern bookkeeping enables us to provide elements to understand the adherence of populations to the phenomenon of repression.

**Realities of the crime of witchcraft: accusations under tension**

In historiography, there exists broad consensus stating that the Sabbath as well as most crimes of which the defendants were accused did not actually occur. Based on this hypothesis generally demonstrated since the 1970s, most historians are now asking the question of the reality which lies behind the crime. If most of the charges against the individuals accused of witchcraft cannot be proven, what pieces of information can be extracted from these documents? The points of view are many. Should the trials be read in a way that picks out elements falling outside the expected framework of their
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production? Should this information be compared with other sources informing us about social and political tensions within the communities or about the agenda of judges? And finally, what is the influence of the conservation of certain sources on our own vision of the phenomenon?

Papers with topics related to these different themes are particularly welcomed.
The conference will be in French and in English.
The conference is open to young researchers, PhD students, Post-doctoral researchers as well as advanced graduate students.

Submission:
You are invited to submit a 300-word abstract with key words in either English or French by November 30th, 2020 to the following email address: maxime.perbellini@ehess.fr.

Please include: a brief résumé, the title of your presentation, as well as your name and your academic affiliation. Please send any additional questions you may have to the aforementioned email address. The presentations will have to be 20 minutes long maximum.

Practical information:
The conference is organized by Maxime Gelly-Perbellini (PhD student at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences - EHESS, Paris, France - and at the Free university of Brussels -ULB-, Belgium, Research and Teaching Assistant at the University of Reims Champagne-Ardenne, France) and Olivier Silberstein (PhD student at the University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland). It is sponsored by the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS, Paris, France). It will take place on the premises of the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS, Paris, France) on May 20th-21st 2021.
The conference would start on May 20th at 2pm and would end on May 21st at 5pm.