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Magic and Its Tools in Cluj in the 16th–18th Centuries



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CLUJ (KOLOZSVÁR, Klausenburg) was gripped by the fever of witch hunts, just like almost every city in Transylvania. As a result of the trials that were organized, at least 18 people were burned at the stake, for whom the courts considered that there was enough evidence to show their guilt. The distribution of these convictions over time is not uniform: most executions took place towards the end of the 16th century and are linked to the name of a single person: György Igyártó, a lawyer of the city, whose activity is worthy of further study.¹

The Legal Organization of the City of Cluj

AS A free royal city (*szabad királyi város*), Cluj enjoyed many legal privileges. Thus, it had decision making autonomy, even having the right to execute the offenders under its jurisdiction. Starting with the second half of the 16th century, the city had a single judge (*bíró*), who made decisions together with a panel of 12 jurors (*esküdtek*) (6 Hungarians and 6 Transylvanian Saxons), chosen annu-

ally from among the centumvirs of the city (according to a diploma issued by John Sigismund in 1568). The centumvirs (*százférfiak*) also played an important role in the decision-making processes.²

The royal judge (*királybíró*), although this function still existed, no longer had the right to make decisions alone, as he was only an assistant to the judge. There was only one forum of appeal: the princely court.

An important role in the legal process was played by the notaries (*jegyző*), who normally had legal training and who, being present at all stages of the process, knew the cases best and could influence the verdicts.

The procurators (*prokátorok*) were the ones who had the right to start the trial of a person, the ones who formulated the accusations, usually being employees of the city in these cases. From the end of the 16th century, in order to stop some excesses of the procurators (it seems that György Igyártó's activity was the one that showed the weaknesses of the system and how these weaknesses could be exploited for private purposes) the institution of directors (today's prosecutors) was created. These were chosen from among the centumvirs and could start trials in an institutionalized form.

The city's legal system changed after Oradea (Várad, Großwardein) was occupied by the Ottomans (1660) and Cluj became a border fortress. At this time, the city lost several of its legal privileges and the head of the county took over the legal attributions.

In the 16th–18th centuries, proving one's guilt was based on Roman law. Thus, an on-the-spot check was made, after which the judge checked the evidence provided.³ The evidence could be: the confessions of the parties involved; the testimonies of the witnesses; the presentation of material evidence related to the case.

Documents were considered stronger than any testimony, and a single witness was not sufficient to prove a fact ("unus testis nullus testis"). The testimony of a higher-ranking witness (a nobleman, for example) was considered stronger than that of a person of more modest means.

The use of torture was allowed in obtaining a confession (there were cases of witchcraft in Cluj in which the defendant was tortured even twice). The information obtained in this way was considered one of the strongest pieces of evidence.

György Igyártó, the Witch Hunter

GYÖRGY IGYÁRTÓ was one of the most controversial figures in the city's legal history. There is little information about his family, but there were people with his family name who held important positions in the city

administration and who were probably his relatives. Igyártó's name first appeared in documents in 1574, when he was accused of a minor transgression (he allegedly gave the vine he owned to be cultivated by someone else). The first mention of his activity as a lawyer can be dated four years later, in 1578, when he defended several people in various lawsuits.

The following year he was accused of much more serious acts: he allegedly poisoned his first wife in order to marry another woman and killed his child. He barely escaped the accusations. This is the key moment for some of his subsequent activities: several people who testified against him in this trial were accused of various acts by Igyártó, the most serious one being witchcraft.

The fear of witches reached its peak in the city, and Igyártó took advantage of this fact. It seems that he did his job quite well: all the people he accused of illicit practices were burned at the stake. There was one exception, though: the charges against a woman were dropped because (as it turned out) her husband offered a bribe to the prosecutor.

Objects Used in Magic Practices in Cluj⁴

THE OBJECTS used in practices of magic were of three kinds: objects (especially ointments) that were used to heal; objects for love spells, objects that were used to bring misfortune and death.

Objects (Especially Ointments) That Were Used to Heal and Protect

IN 1568, magical lard (*bűvös háj*) is mentioned, which was possessed by a learned man from Cluj. The document does not indicate the purpose of this lard, but it probably had a protective role, being used to grease a beam of the house.

The snake's head or the lizard's tail were also used for protection. A woman accused of witchcraft was said to have hidden these objects in her bun, probably in order not to be found out as a witch. The same person was accused of milking the neighbours' cow (through magical practices).

The interpretation of popular practices could also lead to accusations of witchcraft. One of the most interesting cases is that of the maid Anna Istvánné Ludvig. The woman was accused of wanting to separate her master from the woman he wanted to marry (see below). However, the testimonies of the witnesses show something else: instead of evil spells, she was said to have cast heal-

ing spells: she would bathe a sick child in the water in which a dog's head had been boiled (which has healed the child, according to the witnesses).

Salt was a protective element according to the belief of the inhabitants of Cluj. Thus, Kató Szabó was said to have hidden a piece of salt tied with three strings under the stove to heal her client. After the latter found the object, her condition deteriorated, Szabó being accused of this as well. In another case, from 1670, salt was thrown onto a "witch," Judit Kapitány, so that she could not cast spells on another person. According to another testimony, Szabó allegedly gave a person a drink made of roots and tied twine on them in several places, the strings having to be burned in the morning in order for the person to heal.

Another healing attempt by Szabó, which failed, was shown in another light: she prepared an ointment of herbs and gall for a client of hers. After she was arrested, the witness considered that the ointment was made to "bind" the person, who then died. Herbs and ointments were used to heal but were often considered spells. Sára Andrásné Szabó, a woman who was often called to heal, used several products that we would today consider herbal medicines: she used herbs that she put into lard, she healed a wound using salted garlic, and she used lavender water.

Another healer, Erzsébet Damakos Jánosné Hajdú, mixed occult practices into the healing: she harvested herbs (especially belladonna—a plant with healing effects, but which is harmful in large quantities), which she used naked, both to heal and to bring misfortune.

Being a midwife, Kató Szabó allegedly cast spells on breast milk and children. Thus, after the young mother lost her milk, she toasted a piece of bread and left it on the floor. A woman who had breast milk passed over the bread, which was then eaten by the mother who had lost hers, and the milk returned.

Another practice is related to attracting witches who brought misfortune (Miklósne Szeles). After a cow lost her milk, the owner was advised to put the cow's urine and manure into a coat to attract the person who had cast the spell. The practice seemed to work: the accused person appeared on the doorstep and asked for fire, even if she lived far away. For the same purpose, the cow's remaining milk was mixed with wine and cheese was made out of it. The product was then tied to the animal's neck, after which the cow was said to have gone to the house of the person who had cast the spell.

The loss of an animal's milk was a serious economic problem of the time, so one tried to bring it back even by magical means: e.g., a small amount of milk was mixed with salt and this mixture was poured on the back of the cow. In another case, if the cow's milk was lost through witchcraft, it returned after a black cloth was pulled over the back of the cow and then it was hit hard.

Some people tried to keep the animal's milk (probably by transferring it to another cow) even after it was sold: Kata Debreceni was accused of advising someone to cut and keep the hairs from between the cow's udders. In this way, the milk would remain with the original owner, even if he sold the cow.

Among the ointments that were used to heal other people or oneself we find mixes that contained tin, ash bark or a mixture of charcoal, garlic and bread (to heal swollen legs).

Several magical practices were related to the healing of sick children: the child's bath water was taken and cleaned. Then, poppy seeds were broken up and the child was anointed with it, after which he was bathed again. There was a lot of hair in the water and the child was thus cured. In another case, the "witch" advised the family to gather mud from under three bridges and mix it with stagnant water and urine to heal a child.

The black rooster was also used in protective spells: in the trial started by Márton Nyári against his own wife (!), Katus Kassai, a witness allegedly received advice from the woman to bathe with a black rooster under her arm and then no misfortune would come to her.

In 1680, an unsolved case of the murder of a child troubled the city. Given that the perpetrator was not found and the reasons for this horrific crime were not elucidated, one of the hypotheses linked it to magical practices. Thus, Margit Nagy Balás was investigated in this case, on the assumption that she killed the child in order to prepare medicine from the heart, hair and liver of the victim. In the end, the woman was not convicted but was banished from the city, as there were no witnesses in this case.

Another practice was also linked to death: in 1695, the rope from the gallows was used in spells to relieve hip pain. Kata Debreceni, who was accused of a lot of magical practices, brought earth from a grave and threw it in front of the jurors' house to influence a trial.

Objects for Love Spells

THE FIRST love spell mentioned in Cluj dates back to 1583. Thus, a young woman hid a frog in the house, wrapped in vine leaves, in order to enchant a young man.⁵ Next year, Kató Szabó promised a young woman that she would help her get any man she wanted if she brought her a piece of his pants or shoes. Another practice of this woman was related to wine: if the man drank from the wine the girl had washed herself with, she would become his wife.

This practice persisted over time: Erzsébet Damakos Jánosné Hajdú gave a woman the same advice half a century later (in 1630): in order not to quarrel

with her husband (and not to be beaten) she washed herself with wine, after which the wine was given to her husband to drink.

As of the second half of the 17th century, people accused of witchcraft retaliated more and more and sued for slander. Such a trial was initiated in 1665, when Katalin Bölöni Ökrös was accused of putting her own urine in scones and feeding them to people as a love spell.

The frog seemed to be a good tool for such spells: according to Kata Debreceni's "recipe" from 1683, a green frog was taken around St. Anthony's Day and was buried in a new bowl in the middle of an anthill. After the flesh rotted, its bones were good for love spells—the loved one had to be touched with them. In another spell of Debreceni's, the loved one was touched with herbs upon which the girl had urinated nine times.

Certain herbs could also bring about the separation of lovers: a certain root had to be placed between the two people who one wanted to separate, touching their clothes with it, and the two would then hate each other.⁶

Objects That Were Used to Bring Misfortune and Death

THE FIRST magical practice that brought death and misfortune and involved a specific object is mentioned in 1573: the defendant took a piece of smoking wood and later a child of the one who had provided the fire got sick and died.⁷

The following year, a maid called Anna Istvánné Ludvig was accused of wanting to separate her master from the woman he wished to marry. For this purpose, she allegedly buried a bowl containing a dog's head, bones and some roots. According to other testimonies, however, these objects were used to heal (see above).

Spitting in front of the enemy's house is one of the practices considered to bring misfortune. Kató Szabó allegedly did so and "spat three times whenever she passed in front of Péter Nyerges's house." The same person was allegedly guilty of making a maid ill: she asked for nettle and because she did not receive it, she brought misfortune on the house.

The list of Kató Szabó's "sins" is quite long: she would lift the threshold of the door and put salt and ashes under it. The targeted person, who crossed the threshold three times, died shortly afterwards;⁸ she gave bread to someone, who went mad after eating it. She is one of the persons accused of witchcraft by Igyártó and the sentence in her case was burning at the stake.

The name of Miklósné Szeles, mentioned above is linked to several accusations of "stealing" or destroying the milk of animals. After she asked for fire,

the witnesses' cows would lose their milk and the butter went sour, while other cows went to her house and could not be driven away from there.

An interesting case is that of Szemétbíró (alias) Jánosné Varga. The woman and her mother were accused of poisoning her lover by offering him wine in which breast milk had been poured. In the same case, there was word about eggs kept in breast milk that the young man had eaten. The statements do not specify if the woman tried a love spell or a spell that would bring misfortune. It is, however, certain that the young man died, but the woman was declared innocent.

Conclusions

ALTHOUGH WE can find trials against witches throughout the 16th–18th centuries, their climax in Cluj was in the 9th decade of the 16th century and it was mainly linked to the activity of György Igyártó. Nevertheless, such trials were not unique: Peter Bornemissza reported that in 1574, in Bratislava several women were killed, who “walked around in cat-form,” who “hung small children tied from one leg” and had committed other crimes as well.⁹

Even though women were the ones to be usually accused of witchcraft (especially midwives or healers, not only in Cluj, but also throughout Transylvania, a different situation from what was happening in Western Europe),¹⁰ in Cluj there were also two men accused of magical practices. In 1568, a learned man named Mihály allegedly used magic lard and was investigated by the local authorities (we have no knowledge of the conclusions of this investigation). More than a century later (in 1674), another man, Pál Mondre, was tried for witchcraft (but also for other crimes, such as deception). In his case we know the verdict: he was found guilty, pilloried, beaten and banished from the city.

In the second half of the 17th century, women accused of witchcraft chose to retaliate and start their own lawsuits against the slanderers (especially since there had been many cases in the previous century when one of the accusations against the “witches” was that they had not reacted to the accusations of witchcraft).

A new wave of lawsuits began in the 1680s, in the context of the illness of Michael Apafi's wife (Anna Bornemissza), when supernatural reasons were sought at the root of the illness. The wife of Paul Béldi (who was executed by order of the prince) was accused of causing the princess' madness with magical practices and subsequently arrested.

If burning at the stake was a common punishment at the end of the 16th century (especially due to Igyártó's work), starting with the second part of the next

century, the death penalty was applied quite rarely and especially if the person was found guilty of other crimes as well. In 1726, for example, Erzsók Székely Ferencné Jánosi was accused of witchcraft by several people and even though the court seemed convinced of the defendant's guilt, she was sentenced to only one year in prison, after which she had to leave town. In 1729 a person accused of witchcraft (Erzsébet Ótvés Istvánné Beszprimi) was burned at the stake, but other charges were brought against her as well: murder and adultery.

The objects and ingredients used in magical practices are quite varied: there were both commonplace ingredients found in folk medicine, which were mainly used by healers, but were interpreted as being related to magic (such as salt, various herbs, some unnamed, or lavender), but we also encounter extraordinary ingredients, objects and practices: some practices related to cow's milk, the rope from the gallows, frog-related rituals or the case of the murdered child (where the motive of the crime was allegedly related to magic).

TABLE. THE ITEMS USED IN PRACTICES OF MAGIC

Items used	Number of cases	Items used	Number of cases
smoking wood	1	earth	1
spit	1	black goat	1
nettle	1	ram's horn	1
stone	1	dog's head	2
ash	1	frog	2
pants	1	vineleaf	2
gall	1	water	2
borax	1	milk	2
cow urine	1	eggs	2
fire	1	garlic	2
tin	1	coal ointment	2
ash wood	1	string	3
cheese	1	bread	3
poppy seeds	1	cows	3
mud	1	urine	3
pillow	1	scones	3
black rooster	1	bones	4
lavender water	1	roots	4
dust	1	salt	5
child's heart	1	wine	6
child's hair	1	herbs	9
shoe	1	earth	1



Notes

1. An article was published on this person's activity: László Pakó, "A corrupt boszorkányüldöző: Igyártó György prókatori tevékenységéről," *Erdélyi Múzeum* (Cluj-Napoca) 73, 3–4 (2011): 93–103, but there are still some aspects worthy of further research.
2. László Pakó, "Hatalmi konfliktus vagy testületi összefogás? A kolozsvári százférfiak tanácsa és a városi igazságszolgáltatás a 16. század második felében," *Erdélyi Múzeum* 72, 3–4 (2010): 73–87.
3. Péter Tóth G., "A boszorkányok hagyatéka: A tárgyi bizonyíték és a (mágikus) bűnjel a magyarországi boszorkányperekben," in *Tárgy, jel, jelentés: "Tárgy és folklór" konferencia Vaján, 2005. október 7–9-én*, edited by Éva Pócs, *Studia Ethnologica Hungarica IX* (Budapest: L'Harmattan, PTE Néprajz-Kulturális Antropológia Tanszék, 2008), 209–280.
4. The material related to the witchcraft trials in Cluj was published in László Pakó and Péter Tóth G., *Kolozsvári boszorkányperek 1564–1743*, *A magyarországi boszorkányság forrásai, Várostörténeti források 4* (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2014). In what follows we draw on the information from this volume, pp. 76–345.
5. The case must be handled with caution, as the testimony was given at a trial initiated by György Igyártó.
6. The case of Orsolya Dancs.
7. The custom of asking for "fire" from neighbours was a common one: if the fire went out in a house, people would go to the neighbours to ask for a piece of burning wood, as reigniting the fire was a difficult process.
8. This trial is also one prepared by Igyártó, who managed to "prove" that this woman, who was also a healer, used all kinds of magical practices: she cast love spells, healed, but especially brought misfortune using occult forces.
9. Andor Komáromy, ed., *Magyarországi boszorkányperek oklevéltára* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1910), 22.
10. Șarolta Solcan, "Imaginea femeii pe baza documentelor proceselor de vrăjitorie din Transilvania din secolele XVI–XVIII," *Tyragetia: Istorie. Muzeologie* (Chișinău), new ser., 12 (27), 2 (2018): 45.

Abstract

Magic and Its Tools in Cluj in the 16th–18th Centuries

In this article we present some aspects of magic and its tools in Cluj in the 16th–18th centuries. In the first part of the article we discuss the legal organization of the city of Cluj and we present György Igyártó, a prosecutor with a major role in several witch trials at the end of the 16th century. In the second part we enumerate the objects used in magical acts and their purposes, based on documents regarding witch trials in Cluj.

Keywords

magical items, witch trials, Cluj (Kolozsvár, Klausenburg)