

Wolfgang Behringer, Claudia Opitz-Belakhal (Hg.), Hexenkinder – Kinderbanden – Straßenkinder, Bielefeld (Verlag für Regionalgeschichte) 2016, 468 S. (Hexenforschung, 15), ISBN 978-3-89534-975-1, EUR 29,00.

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This volume edits twenty contributions (three in English) to an unusual conference, hosted by the Diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart in August 2011, whose organizers assembled an interdisciplinary group of scholars charged with exploring the intersections of witchcraft accusations and communities of adolescent vagrants in early modern Europe and in parts of contemporary west-central Africa. Its primary architect, Wolfgang Behringer, has a long acquaintance with the connections between children and outbreaks of witch-hunting, having published a seminal survey of the subject in 1989.

Historically, Europe's child-witches played a central and sinister role in witchcraft prosecutions during the second half of the 17th century. Recently, children and adolescents have become prominent targets of witchcraft accusations in regions of west-central Africa that have rarely attracted academic investigators of witchcraft. Using youth gangs, which played a central role in Salzburg's *Zauberer Jackl* panic, probably the bloodiest late 17th-century example, as a conceptual link between older European and recent African fears about the devilish deeds of unsupervised and self-reliant adolescents is a problematic exercise which, as the editors concede at the conclusion of their introduction, »raises more questions than it answers« (p. 44).

Along the way, however, the participants not only provide readers with a great deal of new and little-known information but also offer some useful perspectives about the interplay between children and adults involved in recording their accusations and descriptions of witchcraft. Behringer and Opitz-Belakhal arrange the contributions around five themes. The first, dealing with childhood and witch-beliefs, features Iris Gareis's survey of the relatively well-known Basque children on both sides of the French-Spanish border (p. 87–110). Next come three German examples of youthful urban street gangs, the earliest in Nürnberg in 1595, ending with an essay on the »Deficient God of Salzburg's Child-Witches« by Nordan Nifl Heim, Behringer's doctoral student (p. 183–197). The central section on children as victims and actors in European witch-trials, discussed in the next paragraph, is both the longest and richest. Next comes a heterogeneous section on judicial and pedagogic aspects of misbehaving children, which were occasionally perceived as benevolent; Pia Schmid's investigation of children's religious »awakenings« in early Pietism (p. 349–364) happened at the same time as prosecutions of child-witches elsewhere in the German Empire. Its final section assembles four contributions about present-day youthful street gangs, three from Africa and one from Latin America

by Hartwig Weber, a retired theologian who had previously published a book on children tried as witches¹.

This reviewer, an early modern historian who occasionally encounters himself in footnotes here, learned something everywhere but feasted on its central section. Two outstanding contributions come from well-known experts. Rita Voltmer's characteristically wide-ranging exploration of Jesuit involvement with children as both witch-finders and witches (p. 201–232) ranges across confessional boundaries as well as political borders is followed by Johann Dillinger's characteristically innovative investigation of »witch-adults« (*Hexen-Eltern*) (p. 233–255), distinguishing three types of adult misunderstandings of children's sometimes playful (and occasionally deliberately vindictive) uses of witchcraft vocabularies in order to explain why our written trial records take the forms they do. One of Dillinger's points was cleverly anticipated in the previous section, with Rainer Beck's use of Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer to illustrate how adolescent thieves in early 18th-century Bavaria »played along« by describing pacts with the Devil written in blood (p. 173–174).

The middle section includes valuable studies of groups of children prosecuted as witches in the lands of the Bohemian crown in the 1650s and a decade later in far northern Norway (p. 285–331); but Nicole J. Bettlé's doctoral thesis at Bern, surveying evidence about children tried as witches in the Swiss Confederation, provides our richest new information about 17th-century Europe's child-witches (p. 267–284). Switzerland produced Europe's earliest and latest recorded witch-trials, but our most recent general survey of the subject appeared in 1945, so her findings deserve summarizing. Switzerland's first child witch was executed in 1571 and its last in 1712, but nearly all of its 83 episodes involving over 120 under-aged witchcraft defendants (often in small groups of two–five children, mostly between eight and twelve years old) occurred between 1600 and 1700, with a statistical peak in the 1650s. About half also had relatives accused of witchcraft; many were living in almshouses; 17 of them, all over age ten, were tortured (280 n. 52). Sex ratios vary sharply by canton, with girls predominant in Unterwalden and boys in the Grisons. Official judgments are known for 70% of all cases; exactly one-third (22 boys and 20 girls) were executed, usually without publicity. Over heated protests by Geneva's Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Bettlé finds that most of them »waren weder harmlos noch unschuldig« (p. 282).

It seems easier to understand Europe's shameful early modern experiences with children as both accusers and accused in witch-trials than to grasp what seems to be happening recently with Congolese street-children. As Dillinger reminds us, Europe's legal records about witchcraft not infrequently require us to read them between the lines. But when the evidence presented overwhelmingly references electronically-transmitted reports, the radically different postmodern versions of »bad African magic« spun by a Nigerian Pentecostal film (p. 435–437, 449) and by British

¹ See Wolfgang Behringer's review of Hartwig Weber, *Kinderhexenprozesse*, Frankfurt am Main, Leipzig 1991, in: *Historische Zeitschrift* 257 (1993), p. 750–751.

humanitarian »save-the-abandoned-children« television (p. 448–451) leave an outsider extremely skeptical about discovering »wie es eigentlich gewesen war«. One understands Alexander Rödlach's argument that »sensationalist reports in the mass media, which are further disseminated by non-profit organizations, can cause substantial harm« in Africa (p. 451, repeated on p. 462). Rödlach also deserves the last words here, which apply to early modern European as well as contemporary west African fears about witchcraft: »not everything that is reasonable, logical, and possible is also real« (p. 463).