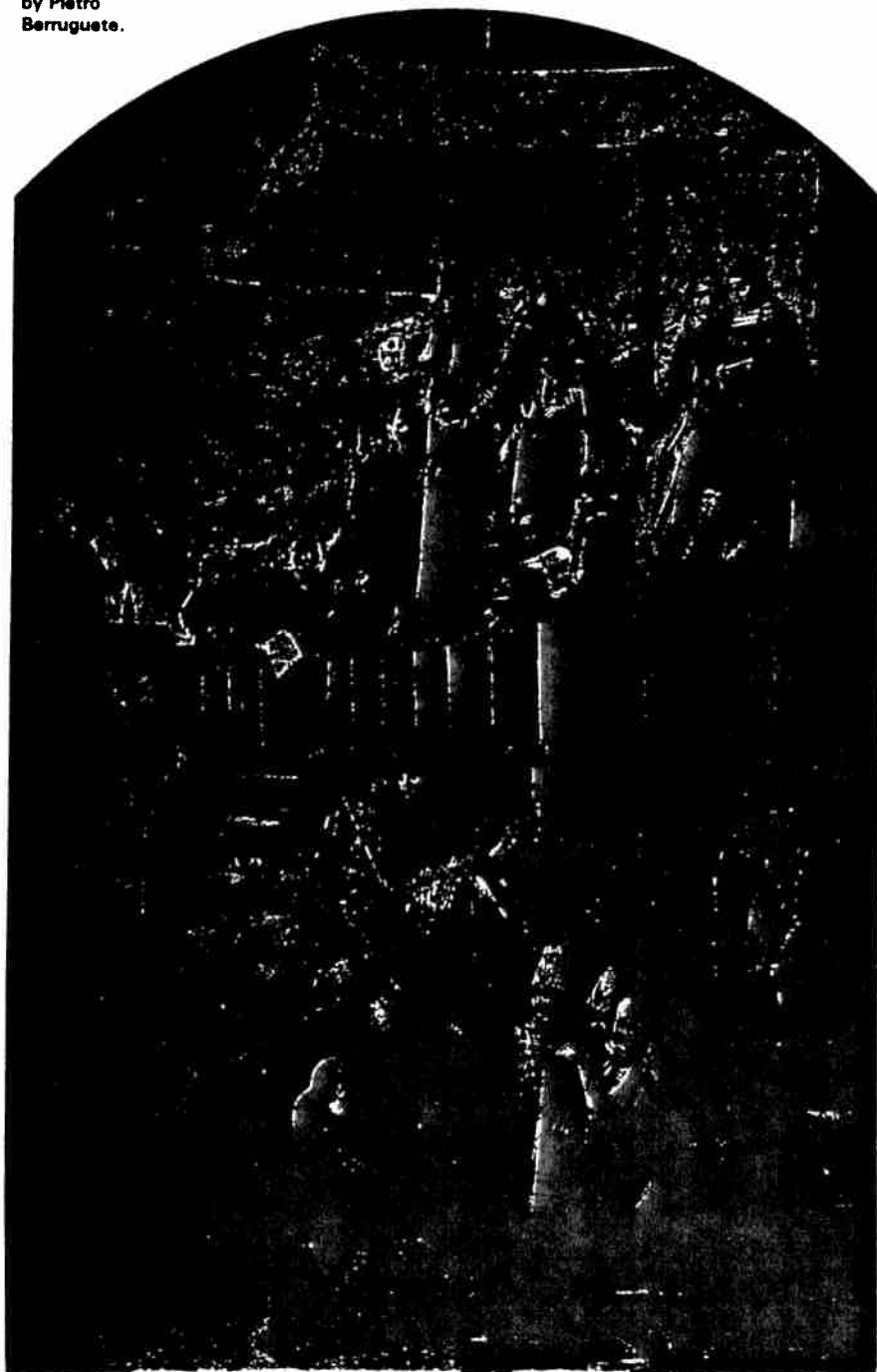


THE GREATEST WITCH-TRIAL OF ALL: Navarre, 1609-14

Gustav Henningsen

Auto-da-fé painted
by Pietro
Berruguete.



The inquisitors at Logroño in northern Spain were kept busy during the summer of 1613. They had no time to spare for bull-fights or picnics, and hardly a moment to sample the fine local Rioja wines: they were up to their eyes in work from dawn to dusk, and allowed themselves no respite even on Sundays and holidays. They were engaged in the greatest witch-trial in history, both quantitatively - it comprised almost 7,000 cases - and qualitatively, for, as one of the inquisitors smugly claimed: 'This subject has never been investigated and explored so thoroughly before.' Nor was it ever to be so treated again.

The inquisitorial tribunal at Logroño, south of Navarre, was in its fifth year of work on this mass trial. It had begun proceedings in January, 1609 and the first thirty-one witches were sent to their *auto-da-fé* in 1610: eleven were burned to death. But then a temporary halt was called, because the tribunal believed that it had uncovered a witch-cult that was active over a wide area. A period of grace was proclaimed, during which time all those who voluntarily reported themselves and denounced their accomplices would escape punishment. The tribunal's most junior inquisitor accordingly spent most of the year 1611 travelling about the Basque lands, taking the Edict of Grace to the witches. Denunciations flowed in: the inquisitor brought back with him 1,802 witchcraft confessions (of which 1,384 came from children aged between seven and fourteen years) and accusations against a further 5,000 persons who had failed to report themselves. The evidence covered 11,000 pages of manuscript; processing it gave the three judges so much work that for eighteen months they had time for nothing else.

By the summer of 1613, with the period of grace allotted to the witches long past, the tribunal had to decide what to do about the 5,000 accused. The two senior inquisitors favoured severity, but their junior colleague (who had actually collected the evidence) thought that all cases should be suspended. He protested that during the whole of his journey through the Basque country he had not found a single shred of proof of the existence of any sect of witches. Indeed, he had come back to Logroño filled with scepticism about the entire trial, which had been instituted by his colleagues several months prior to his appointment to the tribunal in June, 1609. Because of this disagreement among the judges it was decided to refer the matter to the Inquisitor-General and his eight advisers who formed the Supreme Council of the Inquisition in Madrid, commonly known as the *suprema*. The junior inquisitor sent in his report in 1611, but his two senior colleagues procrastinated and argued until the exas-

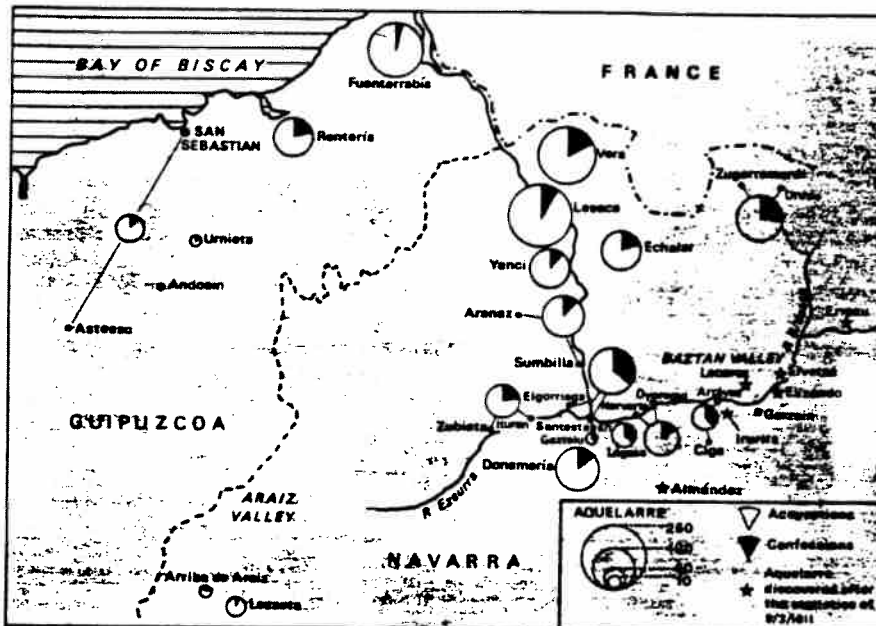
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perated council demanded their opinions without delay. That was why the Logroño tribunal was obliged to work under such pressure throughout the summer.

Who were these three divided judges? The president of the court and the senior inquisitor was Doctor Alonso de Becerra y Holquín, aged 53, a monk of the aristocratic Order of Alcántara. The second inquisitor was the sixty-year-old *licenciado*, Juan de Valle Alvarado. He had originally been a parish priest, but had worked his way up to the post of secretary to the previous Inquisitor-General, who had appointed him to the Logroño tribunal in 1608. The third judge was the *licenciado*, Alonso de Salazar Frías, who was fifty years of age. When he entered the

proved as good as their word. Before long Becerra and Valle openly implied that their colleague was in league with the Devil; they claimed that the Devil was responsible for having Salazar sent to Navarre, and asserted that Salazar defended the witchcraft suspects because he had been 'blinded by the Devil'.

Passions ran high that summer while the three inquisitors sat at their table in the tribunal's courtroom and read out their conflicting interpretations of the evidence. Not infrequently the porter felt obliged to enter the hall and warn the judges that their heated voices could be heard outside in the street. Let us join them for a moment as they battle over the 5,000 suspected witches. Salazar speaks:



Map of northern Spain showing proportion of confessions by witches in relation to accusations.

service of the Holy Office in 1609 he had behind him a career in ecclesiastical law and diplomacy and was exceptionally well-connected: for many years the Cardinal Archbishop of Toledo, Don Bernardo de Sandoval y Rojas, uncle of the King's own Favourite (the Duke of Lerma), was his patron. When the Archbishop became Inquisitor-General in 1608, he bestowed the first post to become vacant upon his protégé, and thus it was that Salazar was sent to serve at Logroño. Upon his arrival he found a major witch-trial in full swing.

For the first two years Salazar seems to have respected the competence of his two senior colleagues. However, when the judgement of the cases for the *auto-da-fé* was being considered in 1610, he ventured to criticise certain points of evidence produced, thus saving two of the accused from the stake - but thereby putting an end to the tranquillity of the tribunal. Salazar was warned by his colleagues that he would not get a moment's peace if he did not adhere to their opinion, and they

My colleagues are wasting their time in maintaining that the more theoretical and complex aspects of this can be properly understood only by the witches, since in the event witchcraft has to be dealt with by judges who are *not* members of the sect . . . It is not very helpful to keep asserting that the Devil is capable of doing this or that; . . . nor is it useful to keep saying that the learned doctors [of the church] state that the existence of witchcraft is certain. Nobody doubts this . . .

The real question is: are we to believe that witchcraft occurred in a given situation simply because of what the witches claim? No. It is clear that the witches are not to be believed, and that the judges should not pass sentence on anyone, unless the case can be proven by external and objective evidence sufficient to convince everyone who hears it. And who can accept the following: that a person can frequently fly through the air and travel a hundred leagues in an hour; that a woman can get out through a space not big enough for a fly; that a person can make himself invisible; that he can be in a river or in the sea and not get wet; or that

he can be in bed and at the sabbath at the same time; . . . and that a witch can turn herself into the shape she fancies, be it housefly or raven? Indeed, these claims go beyond all human reason and many even pass the limits permitted the Devil.

The two senior inquisitors were amazed and appalled by their colleague's cavalier contempt for received opinion. 'It is impossible to comprehend', they protested, 'how anyone dares to assert that it is the scholars and the council of the Inquisition who have been in error and who have committed injustice for all this time.' Becerra and Valle were also aghast at their colleague's refusal to accept the confessions of the witches themselves as firm evidence - especially since they had just spent eighteen months examining the 1,802 depositions.

We marvel that he tries to insinuate that the majority of the witches' confessions and everything else that emerges from the visitation are dreams and fantasies, for it is clear that the tricks, intrigues, and contrivances of the Devil have been powerful and strong enough to blind the understanding of many people. All of this, naturally, has allowed the Devil better to protect his witches.

Becerra and Valle remained unshakably convinced by the statements of the witches themselves that they 'really go to the sabbath and participate corporally in the meetings, and that they believe absolutely that their Devil is God'. In their reports to the council in Madrid they provided details on the sabbaths (called *aqueallarres* in Basque) and the rituals practised, supported with almost interminable quotations from the original confessions.

The main argument of the two senior judges was that the witches' confessions were in agreement each with another as well as with the available books on demonology, and must therefore be true; but to this Salazar objected that his colleagues had taken a selective view of the material and that their whole opinion rested on their subjective evaluation of the confessions:

In order to resolve the contradictions which emerge from the confessions, my colleagues divide the defendants into three categories: those of good, bad, and indifferent confessions. We have, however, no method or rule which allows us to evaluate each confession other than the arbitrary one that my colleagues have used, and refer to in their report. Thus the note of 'bad' is given to some confessions which another judge might call good, and vice versa.

Salazar further denied the connection drawn by his colleagues between an act of malice - such as a curse or a spell - and an actual misfortune. 'Until it has been clearly and distinctly ascertained that certain events resulted from *maleficia*', he argued, 'my colleagues cannot call them proofs.' He emphasised that there was no evidence for the efficacy of spells



Cardinal Sandoval y Rojas, Archbishop of Toledo, who became Inquisitor-General in 1608.

outside the confessions of the witches themselves, and reminded his superiors in Madrid that 'We have no more ground for believing the accomplices about this than for believing the other details about the gatherings, dances and sabbaths, which pass beyond the limits of credulity'. Salazar concluded his submission to the Inquisitor-General with a recommendation that all the accused should be pardoned because they were innocent, and he dubbed the entire trial 'the most regrettable affair in the history of the Inquisition'. The two other judges remained unmoved to the last, and complained that the delay in prosecuting the 5,000 suspects had 'made the Devil and his witches bolder' so that 'the sect' was 'constantly acquiring more members'.

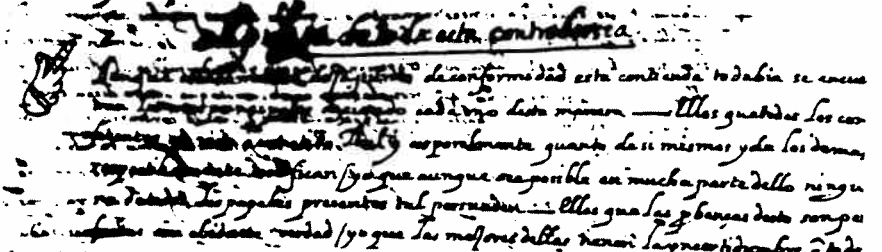
These bitter disagreements between the inquisitors, on which the fate of 5,000 and more persons depended, were more than mere differences of temperament: they reflected the clash of two cultures. All three judges were ordained priests, and all three were university graduates; but where Valle and Becerra had read theology, Salazar had studied canon law. Where the senior inquisitors constantly assessed evidence in the light of the opinions and recommendations of the authorities (that is to say of the demonologists), their junior colleague was interested only in the case in hand. Valle and Becerra took the theories of the demonologists as their point of departure and only accepted the witches' confessions when they accorded with this material; but Salazar was interested solely in what could be proved empirically in particular cases, and he could therefore not accept the witches' confessions until they had been substantiated by tangible proof or by evidence from persons who were not themselves witches.

The Inquisitor-General evidently shared the inductive philosophy of his protégé, and so did his council. They had only sanctioned the burnings of 1610, influenced by the alarmist reports from

Logroño, with great reluctance. Normally the *suprema* was sceptical about magic and witchcraft: the last burnings for that offence had taken place in 1526, and in 1538 the council had warned the tribunal of Navarre not to believe everything that they read in the *Malleus maleficarum*, since it contained many mistakes. The council was therefore merely resuming its traditional posture when, on August 29th, 1614, it ruled that all the trials pending at Logroño should be dismissed. At the same time new instructions were issued, based on a draft prepared by Salazar, which made the rules for accepting evidence so rigorous that in fact they brought witch burnings in Spain to an end long before this happened in the rest of Europe (apart from a few cases where local authorities managed to put a witch to death before the Inquisition could intervene).

But if the Devil was not at work in the green and pleasant Basque country, what had caused the panic about witches there during the 1600s? The detailed reports filed by Salazar during his visitation of 1611 make it possible to reconstruct with exactitude the genesis and progress of a witchcraze - something that historians have been unable to do for other areas. In the northern part of Navarre, where

Part of Salazar's record of his investigation of the witchcraze in Navarre.



the witch panic spread during the winter of 1610-11, Salazar noted that all those under suspicion were in danger of being lynched: stones were thrown at them, bonfires were lit around their houses, and some had their houses pulled down around their ears. The village people resorted to every possible form of torture in order to force a confession: some were tied to trees and made to stand out through the cold winter nights; others were made to stand with their feet in water until it froze around them; others again were let down naked on ropes from bridges and ducked several times to the bottom of icy cold rivers. In some places people dragged the 'witches' out of their houses and tied them one after another with their legs between the rungs of a long ladder and made them walk around with the ladder all night to the accompaniment of shouts and cries and lights in the streets while a thousand insults were hurled at them. The popular violence in the mountains of Navarre claimed several lives that winter.

But Salazar did not only record; he also sought to explain. He wished to under-

stand this sudden panic - for sudden it certainly was - and one of the most astonishing results of his investigations was that, before the spread of the persecutions, the witch sect was completely unknown among the Basques.

There had been local notions about isolated village witches who were able to harm their neighbours by cursing them, but no one had heard anything about the witches having a secret organisation and nocturnal gatherings; indeed, old people said bluntly that they had not even known what a witches' sabbath was. They only found out the truth in 1609, when Judge Pierre de Lancre, from the *parlement* of Bordeaux, condemned to death about 100 witches from the Pays de Labourd, on the French side of the Pyrenees. The witchcraze had already been in existence there for a couple of years, but it was not until 1609 that it spread into Spain, and then to only five or six small towns near the border. Knowledge of the witch sect came to these towns through various channels: through rumours from France, through people who had travelled up to Bayonne to see the burning of the French witches, and finally through sermons preached by the local priests who had actually been encouraged by the Inquisi-

tion to expose the supposed witches in their congregations. In all other districts of the Logroño tribunal peace reigned right up to the autumn of 1610, when preachers were sent up into the mountains to convert all those who might be influenced by the evil sect; but when the *auto-da-fé* was held in Logroño with the first witches, 30,000 people came pouring in to hear the sentences read out and see the witches burned. The preaching crusade, and the *auto-da-fé*, caused an explosive spread of the witchcraze.

The panic began with an outbreak of dreams. Large numbers of people, for the most part children and young people, dreamed that they were taken to the witches' sabbath at night while they lay asleep in bed. This epidemic of what psychologists today would term 'stereotyped' dreams spread from village to village; night after night the people affected dreamed that they were fetched to the sabbaths. Once the 'bewitched' people, or the child witches, publicly recounted their nocturnal adventures, the witch panic got under way. 'I have observed',

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Witches at a sabbath or *aqualarre* as it was called in the Basque regions; engraving of 1612.

noted Salazar in a famous phrase, 'that there were neither witches nor bewitched in a village until they were talked and written about.'

But the dreams were not turned into accusations immediately; it was some time before the children chose to reveal who it was that came to fetch them at night. In Aranaz, in northern Navarre, the witchcraze did not get started until after a father had wormed the information out of his son that it was the cowherd Yricia who took him to the witches' sabbath. The irate father went straight to Yricia, and pointing a dagger at his chest, asked him why he had bewitched his son. After Yricia had confessed to witchcraft he was taken to the local agent of the Inquisition who received his confession and sent him to Logroño as a prisoner. During the following day thirty other child witches at Aranaz confessed that the cowherd had taken them to the sabbath too, and after his removal the children agreed among themselves that they were also taken there by a sixty-year-old widow. And when she too was arrested, the children accused another woman . . .

Everywhere in the Basque witchcraze there were the same three components: indoctrination, stereotyped dreams, forced confessions. The panic reached its crescendo during the summer and autumn of 1611 when Salazar and his assistants

went travelling about the countryside with their Edict of Grace. Each time the edict was proclaimed, sermons were preached against the witches with so much explicit and suggestive detail that Salazar became alarmed. 'In the present unhealthy climate', he wrote in January, 1612, 'it is harmful to air these matters in public at all, since this could cause the people greater and more widespread damage than they have suffered already.' As the proper remedy for witchcraft Salazar recommended instead 'silence and discretion'. From then on the witch hysteria began to decline and by 1613 it had completely disappeared, apart from a few valleys in the Pyrenees which had been affected late. Nowhere did the panic last for more than two or three years.

The principal reason for the brief existence of this dangerous phenomenon was its monstrous form. In some villages it could result in more than half the inhabitants being denounced as witches: children, women and men; young and old; rich and poor; clerics and laity - no social group escaped. Everyone began to accuse everyone else: children even denounced their own parents and vice versa. As people gradually realised that the witch-hunt was leading to the complete breakdown of society, they became more willing to settle their differences amicably, out of court. At the local level the epidemic could thus regulate itself. But con-

ciliation might be refused if the central authorities became involved, for they might insist that the legal purge be carried on until all those accused and convicted had been punished. That was what Becerra and Valle wanted in the summer of 1613; but, thanks to Salazar, the Basque witchcraze was no more than a brief if unpleasant interlude. After the cases from Logroño were dismissed, the council of the Inquisition resumed its former practice; and while various European courts continued to send witches to the stake, the 2,000 or so persons accused of witchcraft before the tribunals of the Spanish Inquisition received only mild sentences or were acquitted.

Yet it was only in the suspension of executions that Spain took the lead, for witch-trials continued to be held long after that type of case had been abandoned by all other European courts. As late as 1791 the Inquisition in Barcelona prosecuted a woman who confessed to having pledged her soul to the Devil and taken part in a witches' sabbath. The scepticism of Alonso de Salazar Frías, the 'witches' advocate', was apparently still not accepted by all his colleagues.

NOTES ON FURTHER READING

G. Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate: Basque Witchcraft and the Spanish Inquisition, 1609-1614*, University of Nevada Press (San Reno, 1980); Julio Caro Baroja, *The World of the Witches*, University of Chicago Press (London and Chicago, 1964).