



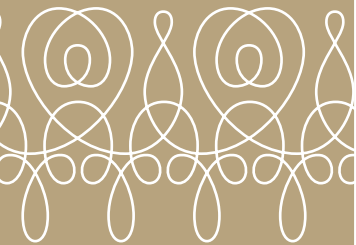
THE

# Hungarian Historical Review

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ACADEMIÆ SCIENTIARUM HUNGARICÆ  
*Natural Resources and Society*

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THE

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ACADEMIÆ SCIENTIARUM HUNGARICÆ



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# The Hungarian Historical Review

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## *Natural Resources and Society*

Gábor Demeter and Beatrix F. Romhányi  
Special Editors of the Thematic Issue

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## Styrian Witches in European Perspectives: Ethnographic Fieldwork.

By Mirjam Mencej. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 454 pp.

It may seem self-evident that the study of witchcraft is one of the most eminent fields in which various interdisciplinary endeavors have intermingled in both historical and contemporary contexts. This has been particularly true since the 1970s, a decade that bore witness to the anthropological turn in the discipline of history, in which witchcraft studies played a significant role, and extended the methodological toolkit and framework of historical studies and brought the individual agents of history (people) to the forefront. This shift explains in no small part why Peter Burke could famously state in 1993 that “witchcraft has moved from the periphery of historical attention to a place near the center.” From this point onwards, history has had even stronger connection to anthropology, which it should maintain, since modern anthropology can investigate existing analogue structures, modified by time, which can be relevant to historical investigations. Therefore, the works of anthropologists who are exploring the contemporary and present continuations of witchcraft are indispensable to any subtle understanding of the constantly reoccurring personal roles and social tensions brought to the fore by witchcraft, which in varying forms has persisted over time.

The work of Mirjam Mencej is an excellent example of this melting pot of social sciences (social history, cultural and social anthropology, ethnography, etc.). Although her work is rooted in many fields, the applied methodology is mainly anthropological and ethnographical (semi-structured personal interviews), with the extensive use of both historical and contemporary parallels from the available secondary literature (pp.23–33). This conforms well to her focus on the continuation of witchcraft and its contemporary and transformed forms and manifestations. Her study sheds light on the present status of a post-Yugoslavian hinterland while also emphasizing many local social aspects of the traditions of witchcraft. Thus, the work can be regarded as a reference point for historical investigations as well, since it suggests that traditional forms of witchcraft still endure in this region.

One of the most important virtues of Mencej’s monograph is the combination of the empirical and theoretical approaches towards the study of witchcraft. As an overall remark, the reader is grateful for the frequent citations from the sources and interviews, which are so abundant that the quoted texts can be seen as an incorporated source edition, which is fortunate because of the

language barriers. However, because of the colloquiality of the cited texts, they are rather hard to follow in some cases, though they nonetheless persuasively suggest that, for those people who are in the focus, witchcraft is an everyday narrative and explanatory system.

Mencej's study is based on semi-structured interviews with direct informants recorded in 2000–2001 and 2013–2015 by a number of participants (the main researcher, university students, etc.) in a collective research study. The fieldwork was conducted in the undeveloped rural region of Styria in northeastern Slovenia, a remote area with a decreasing population, limited economic opportunities, and major problems concerning the accessibility of general public infrastructure (for example, public transportation) and essential services (education, healthcare). It is a highly self-sufficient, close-knit agricultural society which was only recently (and partly) reached by the processes associated with modernization. Because of this, the study had to grapple with the general problems faced in contemporary witchcraft studies (the high age of the people interviewed, the relatively fast transformation of the outer cultural milieu, etc.). However, since many interviews (260) were done and a relatively dense body of material was available from many settlements, Mencej's study addressed these problems.

As a starting point, Mencej describes a standard type of historical witchcraft with the general features (shapeshifting witches, inflicting *maleficium* on different levels etc.) characteristic of the Habsburg territories and a relatively late decriminalization process in the middle of the eighteenth century. She examines the major discourses on local witchcraft (witchcraft, Christian, rational, new age). Although this may seem self-evident, these narrative explanations intermingle. One should note that the role of the devil in cases of witchcraft in this region is surprisingly uninfluential, and the matters of witchcraft are essentially interpersonal and less communal. Furthermore, as Mencej's discussion of these discourses reveals, one of the most significant issues concerns the belief in witchcraft itself. Mencej points out that even the most skeptical people may commit acts the meanings of which seem to be shaped by the narratives on witchcraft, though all the while they deny their beliefs (for example, by stating that the act of hiding an egg on someone else's property to counteract malicious acts against fertility of animals is not witchcraft, but when it is committed not as a response to a malicious act, it is witchcraft).

As a general statement and main idea, Mencej states that witchcraft is of social origin and she claims that it should be discussed as such. So, within this framework the notion of bewitchment is an explanatory strategy for

misfortune and malfunctioning social interactions. Mencej differentiates between three classes or types of witches and builds her book around them. Her first and main category is the “neighborhood witch,” to whom she attributes the cases of “normal” bewitchment between people who are acquainted with each other. Her second category is the “village witch,” who is accused of having committed acts of witchcraft or is acknowledged as a witch by the whole or a major part of the community. She notes that the people interviewed usually used these individuals as scapegoats who allegedly had caused harm to the whole village (for example, weather problems) and usually had distinctive physical signs (such as a limp, ugly features, eyebrows grown together, etc.), a bad family reputation, and a lower social and economic status. They were also believed to own magical objects (for example, magical books). As a third category, Mencej describes the “night witches,” which was the least “personalized” category. The so-called night witches seem to more resemble figures from folk beliefs who cause people supernatural problems and often lose their way (for example, they walk around in familiar places or cannot find their way out of the bushes).

In the most intriguing sections of her work, Mencej introduces the smallest locality and narrowest kinship aspects of witchcraft (neighborhood witches) and dwells on its complex connections to everyday life. In doing so, she defines the most common forms of local conflict situations and their connections to economic interactions, family ties, and marital problems. She also considers the common objects or targets of witchcraft from the perspectives of their economic importance in the household (for example, crops and livestock, especially cows) and their vulnerability due to poor living conditions (for example, the health of children). Offering a colorful tableau of various acts of bewitchment, Mencej enumerates the magical practices and modes of malicious acts, separating them by the acts of *maleficum* (touching, looking, speaking, and other magical practices) and their other manners (for example, acts of speech such as praising or threatening). Her discussion of these practices and the beliefs concerning them offers insights into the social ambient of the communities and the manifold ways in which witchcraft narratives are constructed and the various functions they serve, which are neatly emphasized in the book.

Many of these acts are embedded in a historical context (see, for example, the discussion of the evil-eye: pp.142–48.) or are shown to have various parallels (for example, magical milking, etc.). All in all, the most captivating elements of

the presentation of these local beliefs and practices are the explanations of the functions, roles, and physical and psychological effects of witchcraft. Mencej describes many problems, for example, whether the acts allegedly committed are mere elements of the narratives constructed by the accusers or victims and exist only on the level of discourses. She points out that even the physically possible and explainable practices can be perceived and presented as supernatural. For example gathering dew or moisture with a sheet of linen can be seen as an act which causes damage to crops, though in the biological sense it really can do harm when it is done in the right time. Furthermore, even simple crimes committed out of envy (such as poisoning animals) can be described within the context of the witchcraft discourse, even if there are rational explanations. Like the witches are generally accused to turn into toads as shapeshifters and approaching houses and barns, and cause harm on many levels. But it is true that the phlegm of toads or salamanders can cause different conditions in animals and humans. However, Mencej also points out that it is possible that some of the practices are actually happening or could have happened, since some of the acts are even confessed or admitted, especially in case of counter acts (for example, killing the toad-witches and put them on the end of the forks near to borders), or generally perceived less harmful acts (for example, someone claim the she has an evil-eye). Mencej also includes an interesting discussion of mental disorders and psychosomatic diseases, which can be understood as responses to or repercussions of imagined bewitchments (for example, because of the severe depression of one family member, the general conditions of a household can worsen), and she explains how the consequences of diseases can fall back onto the actual accuser. And this is connected to accusations which are continuously being raised, since the alleged signs of bewitchment, acts committed in response to a perceived act of witchcraft, and even the ritual burning of evidence are constantly alternating between victims, accusers, witches, and their helpers, the “unwitchers,” and sometimes these acts create physical evidence.

Mencej astutely observes that any attempt to capture, in a scholarly monograph, the entirety of witchcraft in a region is a complicated undertaking: it is rather difficult to write synthetically of the various aspects of witchcraft. She claims that the common idea behind these social acts is the notion of “othering,” the belief that the deeds and persons perceived as malicious should be of another nature, and that this other nature differentiates these individuals from the majority and can explain all problems which arise in a community.



The difficulty of this task notwithstanding, Mencej's efforts to describe this composite system of beliefs and acts in one comprehensive work have been fruitful. Its complexity makes her book original, since she has not only written a book about witchcraft in a region of Slovenia but has also managed to provide a thick description of everyday life which offers a good example to scholars of other regions.

Gergely Brandl  
University of Szeged

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# Hungarian Historical Review

## Aims and Scope

The Hungarian Historical Review is a peer-reviewed international journal of the social sciences and humanities with a focus on Hungarian history. The journal's geographical scope—Hungary and East-Central Europe—makes it unique: the Hungarian Historical Review explores historical events in Hungary, but also raises broader questions in a transnational context. The articles and book reviews cover topics regarding Hungarian and East-Central European History. The journal aims to stimulate dialogue on Hungarian and East-Central European History in a transnational context. The journal fills lacuna, as it provides a forum for articles and reviews in English on Hungarian and East-Central European history, making Hungarian historiography accessible to the international reading public and part of the larger international scholarly discourse.

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