THE WITCH TRIALS OF FINNMARK, NORTHERN NORWAY, DURING THE 17TH CENTURY: EVIDENCE FOR ERGOTISM AS A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR¹

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Alm, Torbjørn (Department of botany, Tromsø museum, University of Tromsø, N-9037 Tromsø, Norway). The Witch Trials of Finnmark, Northern Norway during the 17th Cen-TURY: EVIDENCE FOR ERGOTISM AS A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR, Economic Botany 57(3):08em, 2003. During the 17th century, Finnmark suffered the worst witch trials on record in Norway; at least 137 persons were tried, and about two-thirds were executed. A late 17th century manuscript by district govenor H. H. Lilienskiold provides details of 83 trials based on contemporaneous sources. More than half of these provide evidence of a potentially important role of ergotism in triggering persecutions. In 42 trials, it is explicitly stated that witchcraft was "learned" by consuming it, usually in the form of bread or other flour products (17 cases), in milk or beer (23 cases), or a combination (two cases). In the cases involving milk, several witches testifed that some kind of black, grain-like objects were found in the drink, Medical symptoms compatible with ergotism were recorded in numerous trials, including gangrene. convulsions, and hallucinations; the latter often explicitly stated to occur after consumption of foodstuffs or drink. The majority of the convicted witches were females of Norwegian ethnic origin, living in coastal communities where imported flour formed part of the diet. The few, largely self-supporting Sami affected by the witchcraft trials were mainly men, convicted, for example, carrying out traditional shamanic rituals. All flour available in Finnmark during the late 17th century was imported. Rye (Secale cereale), which is especially prone to ergot infection, formed a major part of the imported grain.

Key Words: ergotism; Claviceps purpurea; witch trials; Norway.

The 17th century witch trials in Finnmark, the northernmost county of Norway, are without parallel in other parts of the country in terms of magnitude and severity (Hagen and Sparboe 1998; Næss 1982). Altogether, the trials of 137 persons are testified by surviving evidence (Hagen and Sparboe 1998), of which two-thirds of the people (92) were sentenced to death or died as a consequence of the persecutions, a large number for a sparsely populated area. The total population of Finnmark in the late 17th century has been estimated at about 3200 to 3800 persons (Utne and Solberg 1938). Witches were burned (85 persons), hanged (three), killed in prison (two) or died of torture (two); only 22 persons were acquitted; the rest received lighter sentences of fines or imprisonment. A slightly greater number of trials (141) is known from the Rogaland district of southwestern Norway

(Mauland 1911; Næss 1982), in a much more populous area.

General discussions of witchcraft in Norway are found in Alver (1971) and Næss (1982). According to the latter author, indictments in Norway were raised on three different counts: diabolism (infrequent, with Finnmark as an exception), malefaction, that is, people accused of using witchcraft to cause harm, and healing with magical formulas and signs. For further discussion of the latter category, see Grambo (1979). A large collection of Norwegian magic formulas is found in Bang (1902).

Although much of the original court material has been lost, available evidence from Finnmark surpasses that of any other area in Norway, both in quantity and quality. This is largely due to the work of Hans Hanssen Lilienskiold, district govenor of Finnmark at the end of the 17th century (appointed 1684, dismissed 1701), when the number of prosecutions waned. Having become deeply involved in the plight and poverty of the

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