Location Case Studies

* The 30,000 to 50,000 casualties of the European witch-hunts were not distributed uniformly. Three-quarters of Europe saw not a single trial.
* Witch persecution spread outward from its first centre in alpine Italy in the early 15th century, and came to an end in Poland, where witchcraft laws were finally repealed in 1788.
* The Catholic-ruled Spanish Netherlands (today's Belgium) saw far worse persecutions than the Protestant-ruled United Provinces of the Netherlands, which had stopped burning convicted witches by 1600.
* The Rhineland and Southwest Germany suffered severe outbreaks, with German ecclesiastical territories hit hardest.
* Three-quarters of all witchcraft trials took place in the Catholic-ruled territories of the Holy Roman Empire.
* But Catholic Portugal, Castile and Spanish-ruled Italy, and the Orthodox lands of Eastern Europe saw virtually none.
* The town of Baden burned 200 witches from 1627 to 1630, more than all the convicted witches who perished in Sweden.
* The tiny town of Ellwangen, Germany, burned 393 witches from 1611 to 1618, more than Spain and Portugal combined ever executed.
* The Catholic prince-bishop of Würzburg, Germany, burned 600 witches from 1628 to 1631, more witches than ever died in Protestant Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Iceland combined.
* The Swiss canton of Vaud executed about 1,800 witches from 1611 to 1660, compared with Scotland's toll of between 1,300 and 1,500 and England's toll of 500.
* In the Pays de Vaud, in south-western France, nine of every ten people tried were put to death.
* In Finland, the corresponding figure was about one in six (16%).

**Why were there important differences between the English and continental witch-hunting traditions?**

* The checks and balances inherent in the English jury system, which required a 23-strong body (the grand jury) to indict and a 12-strong one (the petit jury) to convict, always had a restraining effect on prosecutions.
* Another restraining influence was its relatively rare use of torture: the country formally permitted it only when authorized by the monarch, and no more than 81 torture warrants were issued (for all offences) throughout English history.
* Continental European courts, while varying from region to region, tended to concentrate power in individual judges and place far more reliance on torture.

**Where was witch-hunting most severe?**

**Case Studies**

**North Berwick in Scotland**

* This was the first major witchcraft persecution in Scotland, and began with a sensational case involving the royal houses of Denmark and Scotland.
* King James VI sailed to Copenhagen to marry Princess Anne, sister of Christian IV, King of Denmark.
* During their return to Scotland they experienced terrible storms and had to shelter in Norway for several weeks before continuing.
* The admiral of the escorting Danish fleet blamed the storm on the wife of a high official in Copenhagen whom he had insulted.
* Several nobles of the Scottish court were implicated, and witchcraft trials were held in both countries.
* More than a hundred suspected witches in North Berwick were arrested, and many confessed under torture to having met with the Devil in the church at night, and devoted themselves to doing evil.
* This included poisoning the King and other members of his household, and attempting to sink the King's ship.
* One of the accused, Agnes Sampson, was examined by James VI at his palace of Holyrood House. She was fastened to the wall of her cell by a witch's bridle, kept without sleep and tortured.
* After these ordeals, she confessed to the fifty-three indictments against her. She was finally strangled and burned as a witch.
* Nearly 2,000 witchcraft trials took place in Scotland, the vast majority from the period 1620-1680.[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North\_Berwick\_witch\_trials - cite\_note-WME-1](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_Berwick_witch_trials#cite_note-WME-1)
* As many as 4,000 accused witches may have been killed in Scotland in the years 1560-1707.

**Torsaker in Sweden**

* Witch trials suddenly had begun to multiply in Sweden after the first trial in 1668.
* Priests were ordered to inform their congregations of the crimes committed during their sermons.
* Witch-hunts spread across the country, where they had earlier been a rarity.
* One priest had two boys stand at the door of the church to identify the witches by an invisible mark on their forehead as they went in.
* On one occasion, one of these boys pointed at the wife of the priest himself, but she (as she told her grandson who wrote down the story) then slapped the boy, and he quickly apologized.
* On 15 October 1674, the witch trial of Torsåker opened. About one hundred people, of both sexes, were accused by the children.
* The best source for the trial is instead an account written by the grandson of the priest, who wrote down the story in 1735, sixty years afterwards dictated by his grandmother.
* It is unclear how many were convicted and not executed. It is claimed many of those convicted escaped, and that some of the women were not executed because of pregnancy.
* According to the account, 65 women and 6 men were beheaded and their bodies burnt.

**Bamberg**

* The **Bamberg witch trials**, which took place in 1626–1631, are among the more famous cases in European witchcraft history.
* They resulted in the executions of between 300 and 600 people, and were some of the greatest witch trials in history, as well as some of the greatest executions in the Thirty Years' War.
* The Bamberg witch trials erupted during a period of a series of mass witch trials in the area of Southern Germany, at the same time as the Würzburg witch trials.
* The witch craze of the 1620s was not confined to Germany, but influenced Alsace, Lorraine and Franche-Comté.
* The area had been devastated by war and conflicts within the Holy Roman Empire, as well as a series of crop failures, famines and plagues.
* Rather than blaming the politicians, people looked for supernatural explanations, and accusations of witchcraft proliferated.
* Bamberg at the time was a small state ruled by a Prince-Bishop , who took a leading role in the persecutions: he earned the nickname Hexenbischof or ‘Witch-bishop’. He was aided by Bishop Forner, who wrote a book on the subject.
* The Prince-Bbishop built a ‘witch-house,’ complete with torture-chamber adorned with appropriate biblical texts.
* The Bamberg witch trials have been described as possibly the worst of the period.
* The bishop's chancellor, Dr. Haan, was burnt for showing suspicious leniency as a judge. He confessed to having seen five burgomasters of Bamberg at the sabbat, and they too were duly burnt.

**Wurzburg**

* The first persecutions in Würzburg started around the city in 1626 and lasted until 1630.
* As was so often the case, the mass trials of sorcery, the victims included people from all society: nobles, councillors and mayors.
* Many of the witch-trials of the 1620s developed during the Catholic re-conquest. In some areas the lord or bishop was the instigator, in others the Jesuits.
* Sometimes local witch-committees were set up to further the work. The Prince-Bishop of Würzburg was particularly active.
* In his reign of eight years (1623–31) he burnt 900 persons, including his own nephew, nineteen Catholic priests, and children of seven who were said to have had intercourse with demons.
* In Eichstatt, a Bavarian prince-bishopric, a judge claimed the death of 274 witches in 1629.
* In Neuburg, 50 were executed between November 1628 and August 1630.
* In the three prince-archbishoprics of the Rhineland the fires were also relit. At Coblenz, the seat of the Prince-Archbishop of Trier, 24 witches were burnt in 1629; at Schlettstadt at least 30—the beginning of a five-year persecution.
* The craze of the 1620s was not confined to Germany: it raged also across the Rhine in Alsace, Lorraine and Franche-Comté.