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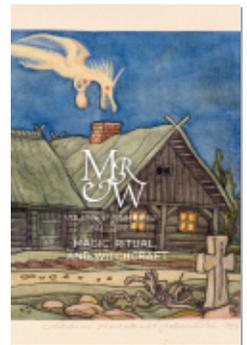
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Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft, Volume 17, Number 2, Fall 2022, pp.  
212-240 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mrw.2022.0024>



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# THE DRAGON AS A HOUSEHOLD SPIRIT: WITCHCRAFT AND ECONOMICS IN EARLY MODERN AND MODERN SOURCES

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## INTRODUCTION

In German-language sources from the early modern period, we encounter a demonic being called “Drak” or “Drache.”<sup>1</sup> Although this translates as “dragon,” this type of being was not the huge, poisonous or fire-breathing monster of antiquity or the Middle Ages. Neither did it guard a hoard of treasure, nor did it dwell in swamps or caves. It did not threaten any maidens and was not slain by any heroes.<sup>2</sup> Rather, this dragon was a household spirit that could take on the form of a flying snake that brought money or readily saleable goods, such as milk or grain, to its master.

This article discusses the significance that the belief in this money-bringing form of dragon might have had for the early modern European witch hunts. First, we look at trial records that mention the dragon. Second, we discuss proto-ethnological and scientific texts from the early modern period that talk about dragons, in order to explore the possible interrelation between these texts and the witch trials. The third part of this article goes beyond the early modern period and reviews folkloristic material from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The dragon as a household spirit featured prominently in so-called folktales (*Volkssagen*) collected at that time in German-speaking areas. Finally, we ask if this modern folkloristic dragon had anything in common with the dragon of the period of the witch trials, and we add

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1. Lutz Mackensen, “Drache,” in *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, eds. Hanns Bächtold-Stäubli and Eduard Hoffmann-Krayer, vol. 2 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1927–1942; reprinted Berlin: De Gruyter, 1987), 364–404, 391.

2. Daniel Ogden, *The Dragon in the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

some remarks concerning the economic ideology encoded into beliefs about the money-bringing dragon.

This text will focus on primary sources from Germany and the Baltic area, printed as well as archival materials.<sup>3</sup> Although spirits that seem to share a number of traits with the German dragon appear in eastern European witch trials and folklore, for considerations of space, this text will throw only occasional comparative glances at such beings as the well-researched belief in the *latawiec* in early modern Poland.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, although some of the general issues discussed here, especially the relationship between magic and the economy, invite a detailed comparison between the European developments and similar phenomena described by Africanists, this article can only provide material for a detailed and up-to-date intercultural comparison—a comparison that remains an important desideratum of witchcraft research.<sup>5</sup> To the best of the author's knowledge, this article is the first English text to discuss the dragon as a household spirit in German history and folklore in any detail.

#### DRAGONS IN WITCH TRIALS

As far as we know today, dragons featured only in German witch trials from Thuringia, Saxony, and Bavaria, i.e. from the eastern parts of today's

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3. The Grimoire parodies “Le veritable dragon rouge” and “Der wahrhaftige feurige Drache” (The truly fiery dragon) are excluded from this study as, despite their misleading titles, they do not deal with dragons at all. See Rudolf Felder, *Der wahrhaftige feurige Drache. Zwei Zauberbuch-Parodien aus dem 18. und 19. Jahrhundert*, (Bonn: Keil Verlag, 1979).

4. Michael Ostling, *Between the Devil and the Host: Imagining Witchcraft in Early Modern Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 221–36.

5. Obviously, the entire historiography of witchcraft owes a lot to anthropological research. See Johannes Dillinger, *Hexen und Magie* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2018), 13–35. In the context of magical economies, the “classics” remain thought-provoking: Michael Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Ralph Austen, “The Moral Economy of Witchcraft: An Essay in Comparative History,” in *Modernity and Its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa*, eds. Jean and John Comaroff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 89–110. However, these authors based what they had to say about the European witch hunts on materials that are by now outdated and that have been proven to be in some respects highly problematic. When Thomas suggested in one of the key texts of modern historiography a cooperation between history and anthropology, he implied that anthropology had developed big ideas that historians should try to apply (Keith Thomas, “History and Anthropology,” *Past and Present* 24 (1963), 3–24). This is unsatisfactory: we need some real dialogue between the disciplines. This is of course a large-scale project.

Germany. There seem to be some exceptional cases from Westphalia we will have to deal with later. The belief in a connection between witchcraft and dragons seems to belong to the bedrock of witch beliefs in this area. “Dragon whore” (“Drachenhure”) was a common insult in sixteenth-century Saxony.<sup>6</sup> Dragons featured in the oldest eastern German trials from the early sixteenth century, and they disappeared only in the early eighteenth century when the witch hunts themselves finally petered out. The last known German witch trial that mentioned a dragon took place in 1714. The Kirstens, a married couple from Cotta near Dresden, were required to appear in court because they had been accused of owning a dragon. They were found not guilty.<sup>7</sup> As late as 1808 belief in the dragon still provoked a trial. The court of Tartu (Dorpat) in Estonia (at that time a part of Tsarist Russia) investigated accusations brought against an affluent lady who had mistreated a maid and a farmhand. The lady—unfortunately the source does not reveal her name—explained that the two servants had brought a dragon into her stables; the dragon proceeded somehow to steal the very lifeforce of her cattle. She claimed that she had merely taken hair and pieces of clothing from the servants as she needed them for a spell that would drive the dragon away from her property. The court refrained from further investigations.<sup>8</sup>

Even during the heyday of the witch hunts, only a minority of eastern German witch trials mentioned a dragon explicitly.<sup>9</sup> If we encounter the dragon only in a comparatively small area and only in a minority of all witch trials this suggests that we must not interpret the dragon of the witch trials as an allusion to the biblical dragon. Of course, the Bible presented Satan or the Antichrist as a dragon (Apoc. 12–13). Thus, it was always easy to associate the dragon with the Devil. However, if the dragon featured only in a relatively small number of trials in the eastern part of the country even though the connection between the Devil and witch was a generic trait of German witch hunts, we cannot simply explain dragons in witch trials by referring to biblical symbolism. Although the Bible did not determine the inclusion of a being called “dragon” in witchcraft narratives, it certainly made it impossible to see a being called “dragon” in a positive light.

The dragon narratives we encounter in the trial records had two main elements: first, the dragon flew into the witch’s house, usually at night. Second,

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6. Dagmar Linhart, *Hausgeister in Franken* (Dettelbach: J. H. Roll Verlag, 1995), 216.

7. Linhart, *Hausgeister*, 216.

8. Leonid Arbusow, “Zauber- und Hexenwahn in den baltischen Provinzen,“ *Rigascher Almanach für 1911*, 101–26, 125.

9. Manfred Wilde, *Die Zauberei- und Hexenprozesse in Kursachsen* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2003), 59.

the dragon brought her money or some kind of agricultural produce that was easy to consume or to sell.

Testimonies of witnesses who claimed to have seen a dragon flying into the defendant's house were often at the center of witch trials. This is significant because the flight of witches themselves played hardly any role in German witch trials. One Claus Fußlein from Streufdorf in Thuringia was accused of witchcraft in 1615 because two of his neighbors declared that "they had seen with their own eyes very clearly that the dragon moved quickly through the air high above the house of Claus Eyerich and soon approached the chimney of Claus Fußlein . . . and slipped in very languidly."<sup>10</sup> In 1670, in a case from Bavarian Rodach the court explained explicitly that a woman was suspected of witchcraft because many people had seen a dragon flying into her house.<sup>11</sup> In 1611, in the trial against the widow Eckstein from Coburg the judge emphasized that a dragon visited her regularly; it came to her house practically every evening.<sup>12</sup> Because people had seen "a clump of fire" in her house, a woman from Merkwitz in Saxony was accused of being a dragon-witch.<sup>13</sup> A lengthy investigation in Saxon Stollberg was entirely based on the testimony of witnesses who declared that they had seen a flame moving in front of the suspect's house for hours.<sup>14</sup> In the trial against Margaretha Hönin from Coburg in 1580 witnesses insisted that they had seen "dragon shooting"—whatever that may be—in front of her house. Based on this evidence, the lawyers of Jena University recommended that the defendant should be tortured to obtain a confession as her guilt was beyond reasonable doubt anyway.<sup>15</sup> In 1686, however, the court of Coburg ended the investigation against one Claus Rottman because his neighbours declared that they had seen a dragon near his house, but not actually flying into his house.<sup>16</sup>

Even though such sightings of dragons were not infrequent and obviously very important in the context of witch trials, generally speaking, people

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10. Kreisarchiv Hildburghausen, 338/6784.

11. Egbert Friedrich, *Hexenjagd im Raum Rodach und die Hexenprozessordnung von Herzog Johann Casimir* (Rodach: Rückert-Kreis, 1985), 95.

12. Staatsarchiv Coburg, LAF 12542.

13. Wilde, *Zauberei*, 59.

14. Staatsarchiv Chemnitz, 32958 Stadt Stollberg (Rat der Stadt und Stadtgericht), no. 11.

15. "Drachenschießen." This strange term is probably best understood as quickly moving flames or sparks that might have come from a dragon rushing through the air. Staatsarchiv Coburg, LAF 12534, 12535.

16. Staatsarchiv Coburg, LAF 12591/II; Friedrich, *Hexenjagd*, 57.

seem to have been reluctant to admit that they had seen a dragon. After all, whoever saw a dragon had been in indirect contact with the world of spirits and demons. A shepherd from Coburg assured the court in 1611 that he had never seen a dragon in his life, even though he was out at night very often. He suggested that this was because he always protected himself with the sign of the cross, especially on Walpurgis night.<sup>17</sup>

As a number of people claimed to have spotted a dragon, we have several descriptions of this mysterious being. In Fußlein's trial a witness said that the dragon looked like a long pole with a thick head about twice the size of a human head. It was covered with fire and emitted sparks.<sup>18</sup> A Saxon source from 1652 claimed that the dragon had a head like a stag or a cow. It was shaped like a tub in front, but the rest of its body was thin and fiery.<sup>19</sup> A witness from Kaltnordenheim in the Rhön hills maintained in 1699 that the dragon was about the size of a large man, it had a pointy head, it was coal black on top, and completely made of fire underneath.<sup>20</sup> Even though these descriptions leave much to the imagination, they seem to have some things in common: the head of the dragon was thicker than the rest of its snakelike form (see Figure 1); it did not breathe fire but emitted sparks or flames from its body.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to the sources about the Polish *latawiec* or its Hungarian counterpart, the *lidérc*, the early modern German materials do not suggest that the dragon ever resembled a bird.<sup>22</sup>

In the mid-eighteenth century, Zedler's encyclopedia—the most important and biggest German encyclopedia of the early modern period—stated laconically that “the common man” holds “the superstitious belief that the dragon is a spirit that serves sorcerers by bringing them all kinds of foodstuffs.”<sup>23</sup> Here we encounter the second element of dragon beliefs. When the dragon flew into the witch's house, it always brought money or produce such as grain, milk, or butter. A defendant from Saxon Fichtenberg identified the

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17. Staatsarchiv Coburg, LAF 12542.

18. Kreisarchiv Hildburghausen, 338/6784.

19. Wilde, *Zauberei*, 204.

20. Thüringisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Weimar, EA, Rechtspflege 1563.

21. Friedrich, *Hexenjagd*, 56–58. When a house burned down in Coburg in 1611, the authorities saw that as evidence in a witch trial: the fire had supposedly been caused by a dragon that flew to its mistress (Staatsarchiv Coburg, LAF 12546).

22. Ostling, *Between*, 223; Johannes Dillinger, *Magical Treasure Hunting in Europe and North America: A History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 72.

23. Anonymous, „Drache, der flügende Drache, Draco volans,” in: Johann Heinrich Zedler, *Universal-Lexicon*, 64 vols. (Halle/Leipzig 1731–54), vol. 7, 1374.



**Figure 1** “Fliegende Drache” [flying dragon]. One of the very few early modern depictions of the dragon as a household spirit; Heinrich Ludwig Fischer, *Das Buch vom Aberglauben*, vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1791), 76. Courtesy of the Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/dasbuchvomabergl01fisc/page/76/mode/2up>, accessed July 5, 2022.

dragon as a “milk or grain devil” in 1652.<sup>24</sup> As late as 1716, a proto-ethnological description of the Fichtel Mountains mentioned that people from that region believed that dragon brought lard to their witches. Indeed, a yellowish soft residue of unknown origin sometimes found on the ground was generally called “dragon lard.” Stories about dragon lard were “not at all uncommon. . . even the children in the street know that and talk about it.”<sup>25</sup> Evidently, belief in the dragon had an important economic element.

In Luther’s exegesis of Jesus’s warning against false prophets and ungodly spirits in 1 John 4:1, he discussed a number of magical practices. Under the heading “incantatores” he first mentioned “the dragon brides and the dragon bridegrooms, they take cheese, butter, grain but it is not profitable.”<sup>26</sup>

24. Wilde, *Zauberei*, 204.

25. Johann Christoph von Pachelbel-Gehag, *Ausführliche Beschreibung des Fichtel-Berges* (Leipzig, 1716), 129–30.

26. <https://docplayer.org/45046744-Luthers-hexenpredigten.html>, 228. Accessed August 9, 2022.

Obviously, Luther was familiar with the belief in the dragon as a household spirit. In contrast to Kramer's misogynist stereotype in the *Malleus maleficarum*, Luther made it plain that men as well as women could be in contact with the demonic dragon. The most significant part of Luther's short note was, however, his claim that dragon magic was "not profitable." Luther apparently felt that it was not quite enough to condemn this type of magic simply because it was magic. At least for the length of a short half sentence he was willing to consider the economic significance of that magic. Dragon magic was not only unlawful and sinful, but it also did not make sense in economic terms. That he even considered this question proves that for Luther, dragon magic was very closely connected with the peasant economy.

Luther went on to declare that dragon-witches could inflict bodily harm on their victims that made them look as if they had been beaten black and blue. This sentence seems to have been added in order to bring the section on dragon-witches to a conclusion. After that, Luther discussed the "Wischelein," a type of brownie that helped with the work on the farm, continuing thence to an account of a demon who had brought goods to a monastery. The Devil, Luther claimed, was never far away. Seemingly incongruously he added that treasure magic was part of that problem. What appears to be an unstructured *omnium gatherum* of magical beliefs and practices makes perfect sense when we see it as a brief discussion of economic magic. The point Luther was trying to make was that the Devil in the form of various spirit beings pretended to help people to get rich or at least to achieve economic gain. It is remarkable that Luther opened his little discussion of economic magic by referring to the dragon-witches. For Luther, dragon magic was evidently economic magic par excellence.

When Luther claimed that dragon magic was not profitable, he probably did so out of principle: the activities of the Devil could not possibly have any positive result. In the court records of witch trials, we find a totally different idea: they claimed time and again that dragons could indeed make witches rich. The money or wares that they brought could strengthen the witches' economic position vis-à-vis their neighbors very considerably. Rumor claimed for example that the Ramhold family mentioned in Johann Matthäus Meyfahrt's early-seventeenth-century treatise on witchcraft owed their rise into Coburg's upper class to a dragon.<sup>27</sup> In 1673, a man from Eisennach was said

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27. Rainer Hambrecht, „Johann Matthäus Meyfahrt (1590–1642) sein Traktat gegen die Hexenprozesse und der Fall Margaretha Ramhold,“ in *Thüringische Forschungen*, eds. Michael Gockeland Volker Wahl (Weimar: Böhlau Köln, 1993) 157–79.

to have a dragon because he was able to lend money on interest even though just a few years earlier he had begged in the streets.<sup>28</sup> As the lawyer Melchior Goldast von Haiminsfeld noted laconically in 1661: “The common man usually says about people who get rich quickly and easily that they have adragon.”<sup>29</sup>

The household dragon of eastern German witch trials seems to have been the very opposite of the English familiar.<sup>30</sup> The familiar took something from the witches: they had to feed it with their blood. The dragon brought something to the witches. It provided them with an additional income. What both beliefs had in common was that they presented preternatural beings in a very concrete and strangely prosaic way. The belief in spirits was surprisingly materialistic.

Where did the dragons acquire the goods they brought to their witches? As early as 1534, in one of the first sources that mentions a dragon at all, Luther’s student Johannes Agricola gave a clear answer to that question: “The devil also appears as a dragon that steals from other people what it brings to its adherents. In return, they have to provide it with food and drink of its own.”<sup>31</sup> As we have already mentioned, in contrast to some medieval dragons, the dragons of the witch hunts did not guard treasure. They simply stole everything they brought to their witches from those witches’ neighbors. Dragons were all about a particularly aggressive form of transfer magic, essentially magical theft. It comes as no surprise in this context that there were magical rituals intended to keep the dragon from plundering one’s farm.<sup>32</sup>

The parallels between dragon-witches and the better-known milk-witches are obvious.<sup>33</sup> However, dragon magic was more flexible than milk magic.

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28. Thüringisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Weimar, EA, Rechtspflege, Nr 1563.

29. Melchior Goldast von Haiminsfeld, *Rechtliches Bedenken von Confiscation der Zauberer und Hexen-Güter* (Bremen, 1661), 70.

30. James Sharpe, “The Witch’s Familiar in Elizabethan England” in *Authority and Consent in Tudor England*, eds. George Bernard and Steven Gunn (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 219–32; Francesca Matteoni, “Familiar Spirits: Blood, Soul and Animal Form in Early Modern England,” in *Body, Soul, Spirits and Supernatural Communication*, ed. Éva Pócs (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), 79–91.

31. Johannes Agricola, *Sybenhundert und fünfzig teütscher Sprichwörter* (Hagenau, 1534), Nr. 301, n.p.

32. Goldast, *Rechtliches*, vol. 1, 26–27, 177–80; Ernst Keller, *Das Grab des Aberglaubens* (Stuttgart, 1785), 146–48.

33. Michael Ostling, “Witchcraft in Poland: Milk and Malefice,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian Levack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 318–33, 318–20; Edward Bever, *The Realities*

It had adapted to the conditions of an economy that relied on monetary exchanges. The dragon did not only steal and bring produce, it stole and brought money.

In trial records, we find neither open nor implicit contradictions between the judges' interpretation of the dragon and the ideas expressed by witnesses: both clearly regarded the dragon as a demon, one of the many forms the Devil could assume. We have already mentioned the witness that identified a dragon as a "milk devil." Dragons could also be identified with the "Buhlteufel" i.e. the incubus, the witch's demon lover. In 1536, the first Saxon witch trial that mentioned sexual intercourse with a demon maintained that a dragon had visited the suspect. It brought produce and money. As soon as it arrived in the witch's house, the dragon turned into a handsome young man and slept with the witch. A woman from Saxony declared in 1652 that she had seen a flying dragon having sex with some women from her village, apparently floating in the air.<sup>34</sup>

The German dragon and the Polish *latawiec* had a lot in common. Both featured in witch trials and both shared the basic characteristic of bringing goods to their owners. However, there are also significant differences. Very few of the German trials explicitly identified dragons with incubi; thus, the sexual element of the German dragon imagination seems to have been less prominent than that of Polish *latawiec* narratives.<sup>35</sup> Polish sources use the word *latawiec* for the ghost of an unbaptized child, as well;<sup>36</sup> this entire system of ideas is totally absent in the German materials. The German dragon has neither an affinity with the spirits of the dead nor with children.<sup>37</sup>

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*of Witchcraft and Popular Magic in Early Modern Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 228, 309–10.

34. Wilde, *Zauberei*, 113–14, 204, 267, cf. Staatsarchiv Coburg, LAF 12549; Friedrich, *Hexenjagd*, 94. For the Devil in the shape of a dragon carrying witches through the air see also Tamar Herzig, "The 'Santa viva' and the Dragon: Witchcraft and Religion in the Writings of Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola," in *Scritture carismi istituzioni percorsi di vita religiosa in età moderna*, eds. Concetta Bianca and Anna Scattigno (Rome: Storia e Letteratura, 2018), 139–50, 143–48; Manfred Tschakner, *Hexenverfolgungen im Toggenburg* (Wattwil: Toggenburger Verlag, 2010), 73–75. The Italian and Alpine dragons mentioned here were not household dragons.

35. Ostling, *Between*, 227–33.

36. *Ibid.*

37. Concerning a highly unusual case involving an extremely imaginative schoolboy (not a baby), see Johannes Dillinger, *Kinder im Hexenprozess. Magie und Kindheit in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2013), 160–65.

German sources in no way suggest that anybody might have believed that the dragon was some kind of fairy, nature spirit, or ghost, as was true for the Polish *latawiec*.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, it is important to note that the sources all agree on the demonic nature of the dragon. Even though it is highly likely that the dragon of the witch trials is the demonic interpretation of an older belief in a household spirit in the form of a snake, early modern German sources known so far indicate that the idea that the dragon was a demon had marginalized or actually subsumed all other narratives about the dragon. This was by no means an exceptional development: in Germany, the discourse on witches was very strong, not just in the minds of educated elites but also among the rural population. A kind of popular demonology often assimilated older magical ideas, changed them almost beyond recognition, and integrated them into its own system of thought.<sup>39</sup>

Who was said to have a dragon and why? Some concrete examples will help to answer this question. Margaretha Hönin from Coburg, who had to face charges for witchcraft in 1580, was rumored to have more milk than her cows could possibly give. Hönin was comparatively well-off. She had a number of servants and owned a vineyard. Hönin seems to have been irrationally fixated on her property and her fear of losing it. Despite her relative wealth, she kept complaining about her poverty. When she had guests at her house, she ordered her servants to take the meat and the bread from the table before her guests had finished their meal. This was a blatant violation of the rules of hospitality.<sup>40</sup>

The criminal court of also Coburg investigated rumors of witchcraft against the widow Ecksteinin in 1611. Ecksteinin engaged in conspicuous consumption. She could afford to leave her old house and move into a better one, in this way communicating to the entire town that she had risen into the upper class. At the same time, Ecksteinin refused to help relatives who had asked her for a small loan. Ecksteinin's late husband had quarreled with several neighbors about various plots of land. He also had a bad reputation for selling produce at inflated prices. Both Ecksteinin and her husband were said to be witches: they had allegedly conjured up a fog in order to steal grain

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38. It is worth noting that ghosts in the shape of fiery apparitions were very common in German folklore. See <http://www.suehnekreuz.de/VA/f.html>, accessed August 9, 2022. However, they were not in any way connected with the dragon.

39. Johannes Dillinger, *"Evil People": A Comparative Study of Witch Hunts in Swabian Austria and the Electorate of Trier* (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2009), 42–73; Dillinger, *Hexen*, 45–47.

40. Staatsarchiv Coburg, LAF 12535.

from their neighbors' fields without being observed. Both were supposedly milk-witches.<sup>41</sup> It was quite typical that the same person was accused of being both a milk-witch and a dragon-witch.<sup>42</sup>

Four years later, the same court tried Petronella Liebermännin for witchcraft and dragon magic. Liebermännin lent money on interest. Her neighbors denounced her as a usurer. Rumor had it that she bewitched debtors who were slow in paying her back. The trial record mentioned explicitly that a cow Liebermännin had sold had stopped giving milk shortly thereafter. The court did not say if it regarded this as fraud or as milk-witchcraft. It simply accepted the fact that Liebermännin was an unreliable business partner, in itself, as damning evidence in a witch trial.<sup>43</sup>

In the winter of 1672/73 the inhabitants of a village near Eisennach spotted balls of fire that flew to the house of Hans Adam Gemeinths. From the beginning of the trial, the court stressed that Gemeinths had become rich quickly and by mysterious means. Just a few years earlier, Gemeinths had begged his neighbors for alms. Now he was able to buy several fields and to lend money to other villagers. The grand total of the loans amounted to the very respectable sum of 100 florins. As Gemeinths made his living knitting socks, the village regarded his sudden wealth with suspicion. Even though his neighbors remembered that Gemeinths's godfather had been a counterfeiter they declared that a dragon had made him rich.<sup>44</sup>

The pattern emerging from these accounts could hardly be any clearer: dragon-witches were persons whose economic behavior was not condoned by the local community. Supposed dragon magic was used to explain material gain and upward social mobility connected with it.<sup>45</sup>

#### EARLY MODERN DISCOURSES ABOUT DRAGONS BEYOND THE WITCH TRIALS

There were only two non-demonological interpretations of the early modern German dragon that had any influence: a zoological interpretation that

41. Staatsarchiv Coburg, LAF, 12542.

42. Cf. e.g. Staatsarchiv Coburg, LAF 12549; Friedrich, *Hexenjagd*, 100; Wilde, *Zauberei*, 113, 248.

43. Staatsarchiv Coburg, LAF 12546.

44. Thüringisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Weimar, EA, Rechtspflege, Nr 1563.

45. This economic element seems to have been more prominent in German sources than in their Polish counterparts about the *latawiec*. It was apparently easy to associate a number of different characteristics with the *latawiec*—incubi, ghosts—whereas the dragon was almost exclusively about material gain. See Ostling, *Between*, 221–33.

presented dragons as mere animals and a natural-historical interpretation conceiving of dragons as chemical or astronomical phenomena.

Early modern science was not quite ready yet to reject the existence of dragons outright. There were still some contemporary reports about dragon sightings; dragons did not only hide in the vast *terrae incognitae* outside of Europe,<sup>46</sup> but there were even reports about dragon-like animals in Germany: in 1533, an entire swarm of two hundred dragons with wings and crowns, but only about two inches long, had supposedly haunted Leipzig.<sup>47</sup> Discoveries of huge bones that did not seem to belong to any known species could revive belief in dragons. A case in point would be the skull of a prehistoric cave bear which Heinrich Vollgnad presented in 1674 as the head of a Transylvanian dragon.<sup>48</sup> Early modern ethnographic literature described the Swiss Alps as the home of dragons.<sup>49</sup> Athanasius Kircher drew attention to a report from 1619: Christoph Schorer, the prefect of the canton of Lucerne, claimed to have seen a dragon flying near Mount Pilatus.<sup>50</sup> In his description of the Lucerne region, Johann Leopold Cysat emphasized in 1661 that the dragon was not just a form that a demon could assume but also a “natural animal.” Authors like Strabo, Pliny, and Augustine, as well as more recent authorities such as Olaus Magnus and Diepold Schilling had proven that. The point of Cysat’s discussion of dragons was probably to prove that the famous dragon stone of Lucerne was authentic. A flying dragon had allegedly dropped this

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46. Hartmann Braun, *Der heßliche und greßliche fewrige Drache: Welcher den 30. Iulii, deß Abends umb 8. Uhr/ dieses 1615. Jahrs/ umbher geflogen* (Darmstadt, 1616); Abraham Seidel, *Prognosticon Astrologico-Physicum Oder Practica Auff das Jahr [ . . . ] M.DC.LXIV, in welchem gehandelt wird von 1. Drachen* (Nürnberg 1664), 1–8; Georg Kaspar Kirchmaier, *Disputationes zoologicae de basilisco, unicornu, phoenice, behemoth et leviathan, dracone* [ . . . ] (Wittenberg, 1661; Nachdruck Jena 1736), 79, 89–91; Georg Kaspar Kirchmaier and Johann Daniel, *De draconibus volantibus* (Wittenbergm, 1675), n.p.

47. Wilde, *Zauberei*, 248.

48. Heinrich Vollgnad, „De draconibus carpathicis et transsylvanicis,“ in *Miscellanea curiosa medico-physica academiae naturae curiosum sive ephemedium* [ . . . ] 4–5 (1673–74), 226–29.

49. Jon Mathieu, „Warum verschwanden die Drachen aus dem Alpenraum,“ paper read in 2020, [https://www.academia.edu/40978846/Warum\\_verschwanden\\_die\\_Drachen\\_aus\\_dem\\_Alpenraum\\_Die\\_Aufkl%C3%A4rung\\_neu\\_befragt](https://www.academia.edu/40978846/Warum_verschwanden_die_Drachen_aus_dem_Alpenraum_Die_Aufkl%C3%A4rung_neu_befragt), accessed August 10, 2022.

50. Athanasius Kircher, *Mundus subterraneus* (Amsterdam, 1665), vol. 1, 93–94. Kircher erroneously called Schorer the prefect of Solothurn (see Scheuchzer, “Itinera,” 385). Centuries later, the Theosophist Helena Blavatsky referred to this episode, if only to deny the existence of dragons and to defend the existence of sea monsters: see Helena Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 207. Today, the emblem of the Pilatus railway is a dragon.

stone in 1420, and the Lucerne city council had confirmed its miraculous healing powers in 1509 and 1523.<sup>51</sup>

Johann Jakob Scheuchzer's description of Switzerland, *Ouresiphoites Helveticus*, presented a number of dragons in 1702.<sup>52</sup> Scheuchzer's dragons were mere animals, no demons. In order to prove the existence of dragons he mentioned four recent sightings of dragons in the principality of Sax-Forstegg. He might have learned about them from Johann Jakob Wagner's work *Historia naturalis Helvetiae curiosa*, published in 1680. The dragons of Sax-Forstegg allegedly attacked cows. However, they did not eat them, but sucked them dry, taking all their milk. In the late 1670s, the entire area, Sax-Forstegg and its neighbors Vaduz and Schellenberg, faced a crisis: cows ceased to give milk. In Vaduz and Schellenberg, this crisis provoked a major witch hunt as the authorities tried to find the milk-witches responsible. In contrast, the discourse on dragons in Sax-Forstegg provided an explanation for the crisis that did not involve witches: it was dragons, presented as a strange kind of parasite, that made the cows dry up. A local clergyman and an official propagated this new interpretation of the crisis. Whether they did so because they really believed in this kind of dragon or in order to keep witch hunts from spreading into Sax-Forstegg is a matter of debate. In early modern central European folk belief, snakes and toads did feature as parasites that took milk from cows.<sup>53</sup>

The Sax-Forstegg episode provides an interesting contrast to the eastern German witch trials involving dragons. In both cases, dragons were supposed to steal milk. However, that is practically the only thing both narratives have in common. The Swiss dragons were dangerous parasites, but they were mere animals. They drank the milk they sucked from cows themselves, rather than turning it over to a human witch for consumption. Witchcraft was not part of the Sax-Forstegg dragon narrative. The eastern German dragons, in

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51. Johann Leopold Cysat, *Beschreibung dess berühmten Lucerner- oder Vier Waldstaetten Sees und dessen fürtrefflichen Qualiteten und sonderbaaren Eygenschaftten* [ . . . ] (Lucerne, 1661), 165–81. The so-called dragon stone—according to a recent examination a ceramic ball—is on display in the Nature Museum at Lucerne, <http://www.naturmuseum.ch/home.php?L=dau&sA=erdw&action=drac>, accessed August 10, 2022.

52. Johann Jakob Scheuchzer, *Ouresiphoites Helveticus* (Leiden, 1723), 366–97.

53. Manfred Tschäikner, „Drachen statt Hexen in der Freiherrnschaft Sax-Forstegg,“ *Werdenberger Jahrbuch* 29 (2016): 98–105. See also Johann Jakob Wagner, *Historia naturalis Helvetiae curiosa* (Zürich, 1680), 241–42; Franz Eckstein, „Milchhexe,“ *HDS* vol. 6, 293–352, 323–25; Tschäikner, *Drachen*, 102–3; Leopold von Schroeder, *Germanische Elben und Götter beim Estenvolke* (Vienna: A. Hölder, 1906), 12–13, 39; Robert Auning, *Über den lettischen Drachen-Mythos* (Puhkis), (Mitau: J. F. Steffenhagen & Sohn, 1892), 12. I would like to thank Professor Tschäikner for alerting me to this most interesting case.

contrast, were not animals at all, but demons in the shape of snakelike monsters. They did not consume milk themselves but brought it to their witches. Even in the comparatively narrow context of magic in early modern German-speaking Europe the term “dragon” (*Drak*, *Drache*) as such meant little: it was the narrative in which the dragon appeared that mattered.

Dragons very similar to the ones mentioned in eastern German witch trials featured in medieval and early modern proto-ethnographical texts. The earliest source was Adam von Bremen’s ecclesiastical history of Hamburg written in the 1070s. Adam wrote about the inhabitants of a northeastern European island he called Aestland that “they do not know the Christian God yet. They worship dragons and flying creatures to which they even sacrifice humans whom they buy from traders. They check carefully that they do not have any blemishes on their bodies because the dragons might reject them if they had.”<sup>54</sup> This is obviously a highly problematic and certainly not very reliable source. Still, it might refer to the medieval snake cult in the Baltic area. At any rate, it is interesting that even this early text presented the dragon in the context of commerce, even if it was a strange and macabre commerce.

A text from the statutes of the 1428 Provincial Synod of Riga seems to refer to ideas that resemble early modern beliefs about dragons more closely: “Offending God in the gravest way, some peasants superstitiously engage in idolatry that comes from the subtle help of demons, that is . . . to their detriment they expect an increase in their worldly possessions from the snakes, the vermin and the trees in which they trust.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, we can clearly prove that at least a learned minority thought that the rural population expected to gain material goods through contact with snakes. In 1547, Mosvidius mentioned in his Lithuanian catechism that those who “turn their mind to the evil arts” worshiped the “Eithuaros,”<sup>56</sup> clearly a distortion of “Aitvarai,” the Lithuanian word for household spirits in the form of dragons. The Protestant minister and printer Jan Malecki mentioned in 1551 that the Lithuanians kept snakes as pets and tried to predict the success of the harvest by their behavior. Malecki also declared that the Lithuanians believed in household

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54. Adam von Bremen *Hamburgische Kirchengeschichte*, ed. Bernhard Schmeidler, (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1917), 4, 17, 244. The crude formulation “worship dragons and flying creatures” (“dracones adorant cum volucris”) might be misleading. Did Adam really try to differentiate between dragons and (other) flying creatures, or was he thinking of flying dragons?

55. Quoted in Yvonne Luven, *Der Kult der Hausschlange: eine Studie zur Religionsgeschichte der Letten und Litauer* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2001), 230.

56. Quoted in Luven, *Kult*, 84.

spirits that brought to their masters what they had stolen elsewhere. Admittedly, he did not connect these “Coboldi” with the pet snakes in any way.<sup>57</sup> Dionysius Fabricius published a history of Livonia in 1620, in which he claimed that in this country “many even now so much depend on superstition that they feed dragons in their homes that steal grain and bring it to their owners. Others feed serpents of great size that steal the milk from the neighbors’ cattle and bring it to one’s own cattle.”<sup>58</sup> Almost in the same breath, he mentioned that the Livonians kept snakes as pets. However, he did not suggest that these phenomena were connected. The question whether or not such a connection really existed is only of secondary importance for this text and may thus remain open.<sup>59</sup>

The dragon lore in the *Reformatio gentis Letticae* published by the theologian Paul Einhorn in 1636 combined zoological speculation and demonology in a unique way. According to Einhorn, the Latvians worshipped an “evil and horrible idol of wealth” that was called “Puke” in Latvian but “Drache” (i.e. “dragon”) in German. Einhorn’s prose could often be obscure, but he described the activities of the dragon very clearly: “Even today many people have it [i.e. a dragon] and it allegedly brings those who have it grains and goods of all kinds that it steals from those who do not have it to bring it to the people who have it.” The owner of a dragon, Einhorn explained, had to reserve a certain place in his house for the dragon to sleep in. He needed to feed it daily. If he failed to do so, the dragon would burn down the house. Anybody who had a dragon kept quiet about it; nevertheless, everybody knew about the existence of dragons because many people had seen them as they flew through the air like flames. A dragon who went out to steal something was red, but when it returned to its master or mistress with stolen goods it was blue (this might have to do with the idea that the dragon supposedly carried its loot in its stomach and spat it out when it arrived at its owner’s house). Einhorn insisted that these dragons were not “natural dragons,” i.e. they were not mere animals. They flew much faster than any animal

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57. Jan Malecki, *De sacrificiis et idololatria veterum Livonum et Borussorum libellus*, in Malecki, *Livoniae historia* (Königsberg: Lufft, 1551), no page numbers; *Scriptores rerum* vol. 3, 390. Malecki might have misunderstood his sources. At least in German texts “Kobold” does not necessarily mean “brownie.” It might be used as an equivalent of “household dragon”: see Schroeder, *Germanische*, 23. For survivals of a Livonian snake cult compare Olof Hermelin, *De origine Livonorum* (Leipzig, 1717), *Scriptores rerum Livonicarum*, 3 vols., (Leipzig, 1848–1853), vol. 3, 562–63.

58. Cf. Luven, *Kult*.

59. Dionysius Fabricius, *Livonicae historiae compendiosa series in quatuor digesta partes* (Rüjiena, 1795), 7–8.

could move. In addition to that, Einhorn declared, real dragons did not steal produce and nobody knew how to train a dragon to do that. The dragon was really a demon with a body made mostly from fire. Even though the dragon seemed to eat the food its owner gave to it, it merely carried it away at lightning speed and thus seemed to devour it. Here, Einhorn used an old multipurpose argument of demonology: the incredible speed of demons deceived the human eye.<sup>60</sup>

The rest of Einhorn's text about dragons resembled a sermon. Greed and thievery were the main themes. The demonic character of the dragon was beyond question simply because "it gave the poor blinded people material wealth in order to rob them of spiritual wealth." The dragon parodied Christ (2 Cor. 8:9) by making its adherents "rich in temporal goods" but "eternally poor." The clergy, Einhorn declared, had to make these "poor people" realize just how sinful dragon magic was. Theft with demonic aid was a lot worse than any other theft. In addition to that, no family had yet managed to better their social position permanently with the help of a dragon. Even if a dragon owner got rich very quickly, his or her children would not only lose all ill-gotten riches again but also the goods that were rightfully theirs. Interestingly, even though Einhorn clearly knew the basics of demonology, he took pains never to use the word "witch" in his text about dragons and dragon owners. He did not even suggest that criminal charges should be brought against dragon owners. Why Einhorn did so remains unclear; he might have tried to avoid anything that could provoke a major persecution—the example of the grotesque zenith of the German witch hunts around 1630 must have been fresh in his mind—or he accepted, like Lerchheimer, Prätorius, or Tanner, that magic should be treated as a spiritual, not a legal problem.<sup>61</sup>

In Poland, the geographical link between the Baltic region and Germany, the dragon-like *latawiec* featured in several witch trials.<sup>62</sup> However, so far, no Baltic witch trials that mention the dragon have been found. Nevertheless, early modern popular dragon beliefs of the Baltic area were an exact parallel to the dragon as it appeared in eastern German witch trials. Even though the sources came from widely different contexts, they evidently spoke about

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60. Paul Einhorn, *Reformatio gentis Letticae in ducatu Curlandiae. Ein christlicher Unterrichte*, [Riga, 1636] *Scriptores rerum livonicarum*, 3 vols., (Leipzig, 1848–1853), vol. 3, 605–38, 624–26. It seems like a joke, but the surname of the dragon expert Einhorn literally means "unicorn."

61. Einhorn, *Reformatio*, vol. 3, 605–38, 626–28; see also Dillinger, *Hexen*, 138–39.

62. Ostling, *Between*, 221–36; Wanda Wyporska, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Poland 1500-1800* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) mentions only milk-witches and magical theft.

the same magical motif—a flying dragon that stole goods in order to bring them to its master or mistress. The core idea remained the same, even if the sources presented it in different contexts. One might assume that there was a folkloristic belief in dragons in early modern eastern Germany that was largely identical with that of the Baltic area. In the context of the witch trials, the dragon of folk belief was re-interpreted as a demon.

Mostly in the second half of the seventeenth century, eastern German and Scandinavian scientists suggested explanations for dragon sightings that were neither zoological nor entirely demonological in character. As most of these authors did not refer to witch trials it is safe to assume that the folk belief in dragons as household spirits had aroused their interest.<sup>63</sup> “*Draco volans*” (i.e. the flying dragon) was a specialist term for a rare celestial phenomenon the true nature of which remained a matter of debate. In 1624, the scientist Johannes Flancus explained “*draco volans*” as a meteor that emitted fire and greasy smoke. Flancus stated that this smoke seemed to come down onto houses and to enter their chimneys. Why precisely that happened he did not really explain but he insisted that this was a completely natural phenomenon. Flancus maintained that the Devil as the lord of the air could manipulate these phenomena; however, he did not suggest that they might have anything to do with witchcraft.<sup>64</sup> Even if Flancus’ explanation was rather sketchy, it is remarkable how well his explanation of the dragon as a meteor fits the descriptions we find in the German witch trials. They described the dragon as a flame that moved swiftly across the night sky, often adding that it had a thick head and a long, thin tail. One might indeed assume that misinterpretations of meteor sightings were in part responsible for reports about flying dragons.

The first known scientist known to explicitly mention witch trials in his discussion of the dragon was Caspar Hammius. In a treatise on fire and lightning published in 1650 in Gdańsk, he maintained that the confessions of witches proved that the Devil took on the shape of a dragon. The Devil “in the form of a dragon” brought “grain, money, gems and other precise objects he had stolen to rich people.” The dragon expected to be fed with

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63. Olaus Borrichius, *Dissertation philologica de lucta Frothonis I cum dracone thesauro incubante* (Copenhagen, 1686); Kirchmaier, *Disputationes*, esp. 79–91; Kirchmaier and Daniel, *De draconibus*, passim; Peter Lagerlöf and Daniel Norlind, *Dissertatio de draconibus* (Uppsala, 1683; Nachdruck Uppsala, 1685); Jakob Mylius and Benjamin Praetorius, *Diatribes physica de dracone volante et igne fatuo* (Leipzig, 1653); Esaisa Fleischer and Nikolaus Svenonius, *De dracone dissertatione philosophica* (Copenhagen, 1686).

64. Johannes Flancus and Caspar Pomeranus, *Exercitationum physicarum nona de meteoris* (Frankfurt, 1624), n.p.

milk. If it felt neglected by its master it brought vermin instead of produce and could even burn down the house. This dragon was, Hammius stated, supernatural. There was, however, also a natural dragon or rather a natural phenomenon that looked like a dragon. This was nothing but a fiery meteor that trailed smoke behind it. The Devil might use this phenomenon, but in itself it was perfectly natural and harmless.<sup>65</sup>

In 1653, Mylius presented an entire range of possible scientific explanations for dragon sightings: meteors, emanations from the earth, or simply smoke that allegedly clung to the warm roofs of villages that were surrounded by dense woods. The last explanation made of the dragon an early modern smog problem.<sup>66</sup> Lagerlöf wrote in 1683 that the uneducated lower classes talked a lot about dragons. He himself interpreted them as meteors that came from the sun. A case in point was Schorer's sighting of the dragon near Mount Pilatus, mentioned by Kircher and discussed above. Schorer himself had admitted that at first he was unable to tell if he had seen a meteor or a dragon. An alternative explanation Lagerlöf was willing to accept was that amalgamations of sulphur, salt, and grease could spontaneously ignite in the air. What looked like dragons were simply plumes of smoke caused by this alleged natural phenomenon.<sup>67</sup>

"Popular science" books like Seidel's *Prognosticon astrologo-physicum* published in 1663, or Voigt's *Neu-vermehrter Physicischer Zeit-Vertreiber* from 1686, repeated all the elements of dragon beliefs. The explanation they suggested was as ambivalent as that of the more academic authors: the Devil could take on the form of a household dragon, but there were natural explanations for dragon sightings, too.<sup>68</sup>

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65. "Draconis specie frumenta pecuniam gemmas et alias res pretiosas hominibus opulentis furto. Kaspar Hammius, "De igne lambente, dracone volante et natura fulminis," in *Theoria meteorologica*, ed. Daniel Lagus (Gdańsk, 1650), n.p.

66. Mylius and Praetorius, *Diatribes*, n.p.

67. Lagerlöf and Norlind, *Dissertatione*, 11–12, 19, 22, 27, 39–40.

68. „Ist derjenige der Zauberey zu beschuldigen, auff dessen Hause der Drache sitzt?“ Philomusus Adelsheim Osterl (= Abraham Seidel), *Prognosticon astrologo-physicum* (Nuremberg, 1663), n.p. For biographical information about Seidel cf. <https://library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections/collection/1903>, accessed August 10, 2022; Gottfried Voigt, *Neu-vermehrter Physicischer Zeit-Vertreiber* (Stettin, 1686), 120–26. It is telling that the Württemberg minister Ernst Urban Keller maintained that "dragons" was simply clouds of sulphuric gas, but failed to mention the idea that dragons could steal or bring goods. This rendered his entire account somewhat pointless. As Keller had spent his entire life in southwest Germany, France, and Britain it is likely that he was only passingly familiar with the dragon motif that was clearly at home in eastern Germany east and other parts of northeastern Europe. See Ernst Urban Keller, *Das Grab*

The phenomena, as well as the beliefs the scientist commented on, were largely identical with those found in witch trials and ethnographical texts. It is remarkable that even the scientific debates about the dragon as a household spirit took place exclusively eastern Germany and in the area around the Baltic Sea. It seems that only in this region was the narrative of the household dragon strong and widespread enough to furnish a topic for an academic debate.

This might be the reason why the dragon features only in early modern German sources from the eastern parts of the German-speaking lands. We find the strongest and oldest dragon narratives in northeastern Europe. This might have to do with the tradition of keeping snakes as pets in this area. Thus, one may assume that the belief in the dragon as a household spirit originated in the Baltic area. From there, it might have spread into the eastern parts of Germany. This is important to note as earlier research insisted for no clear reason that dragon lore had been “imported” from German traders into the major ports of eastern Europe.<sup>69</sup> As household dragons were very much a feature of rural life, it seems unlikely that the idea was brought to the merchant towns of the Baltic area by travellers, rather than originating there.

#### THE DRAGON AS A HOUSEHOLD SPIRIT, NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

In *Was wir bringen* (“What we bring”), a neglected play by Goethe, a female protagonist complained: “I have often been suspected of having a dragon flying in and out of my house, simply because I am an efficient, good housewife.”<sup>70</sup> This sentence sums up the social position of alleged dragon-witches in the early modern period perfectly. We do not need to assume that Goethe studied the records of witch trials. He could find a very similar way of thinking about dragons and economic behavior in his own time.

The dragon as a household spirit featured in a huge number of folktales collected in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A discussion of the dragon concept that ignores this type of source material would be incomplete. Folktales are of course highly problematic sources. They are next to

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*des Aberglaubens* (Stuttgart, 1785), 146–48; <https://www.wkgo.de/wkgosrc/pfarrbuch/cms/index/4093>, accessed August 10, 2022.

69. Schroeder, *Germanische*, 40–41.

70. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Was wir bringen* (originally published Tübingen: Cotta, 1802), <https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/view/bsb10858625?page=1m>, accessed August 10, 2022.

impossible to date; at best, we know when they were first written down. We have no guarantee whatsoever that the folklorists who recorded them did not embellish, shorten, or simply misunderstand the tales they heard. However, this crucial problem of the study of folklore is of less interest for the present debate. It does not really matter if and how far popular tales about dragons known on the village level were influenced by products of elite culture. What matters is that these tales were “successful,” i.e. a number of people without privileged access to education accepted the stories as entertaining and important enough to retell them. If that was the case, we may safely assume that the tales were compatible with the worldview of this uneducated majority. Tales that enjoyed some popularity that were told and retold in various regions and over a certain period of time make good sources for the history of mentalities. In other words: the age and origin of a folktale matter less than the fact that it was popular and appealed to a large audience.

We find modern folktales about household dragons between Germany and the Baltic area.<sup>71</sup> Similar motifs appear in Hungary, Romania, and Russia.<sup>72</sup> Modern German folktales about dragons come almost exclusively from the eastern part of the country, with a few exceptions from Westphalia.<sup>73</sup> The household dragon is known as Drache or Drak in Westphalia, Bavaria, Thuringia, and Saxony, in Lusatia as Plon or Zmij, in Pomerania as Alf, in Poland as *latawiec* or *źmij*, in Estonia and Latvia as *pūķis*, in Lithuania as *pūkys*, *aitvaras* (*aitwars*), or *kauks*; the Germans of East Prussia (today the westernmost part of Russia) called it Alf or Kolbuk.<sup>74</sup> There seem to be considerably fewer folktales about the dragon in Germany than in the northern Baltic

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71. Auning, *Lettischen*, passim; Schroeder, *Germanische*, 11–61; Linhart, *Hausgeister*, 213–67. There seem to be no more extant copies of the Ph.D. thesis of Reinhard Knopf, „Der feurige Hausdrachen im deutschen Volksaberglauben,“ (unpublished manuscript, Berlin, 1943). The author would like to thank Dr. Toms Kēncis, University of Latvia, for sending him a copy of the unpublished conference paper that deals with modern dragon beliefs, “Fighting Fire with Fire: Latvian Witchcraft against Witches.” Dr. Kēncis read the paper at the 8th conference of the ISFNR at Pecs, 2015.

72. Ostling, *Between*, 223–24; Dillinger, *Magical*, 72.

73. It is possible that the motif migrated from the east to Westphalia in the nineteenth century. This seems likely as during this time many people of eastern German and Polish descent came to Westphalia in order to work in industry, especially in the coal mines. No early modern sources from this area that mention dragons have been found so far. See Linhart, *Hausgeister*, 228–29.

74. Auning, *Lettischen*, 1–5; Schroeder, *Germanische*, 14–24; Linhart, *Hausgeister*, 219–29, 251; Christa Hinze and Ulf Diederichs (eds.), *Ostpreußische Sagen* (Augsburg: Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1998), 53–54, 276–77; cf. Ostling, *Between*, 223–24.



**Figure 2** “Cygan a zmiij” [Gypsy and dragon]. Modern representation of the treasure-bringing dragon by Lusatian folk artist Měrcin Nowak-Nječorňski (Martin Nowak-Neumann), 1950. Image courtesy of the Serbski muzej / Sorbisches Museum.

Sea area. This might support our assumption that the dragon motif originated in the Baltic.

All these folktales shared the same basic elements: the dragon was a household spirit. It brought money, milk, butter, grain, or other goods to its master or mistress. Whatever the dragon brought, it had stolen from others. Most tales claimed that the dragon swallowed the wares it took and spat them out undamaged as soon as it reached its owner’s house. It entered the house through the chimney or simply through an open window. Its owner prepared a special place in the house for the dragon to hide and sleep. The dragon had to be fed regularly. Of course, the expenses for feeding the dragon were much lower than the additional income it provided to its owner. If the dragon received insufficient food, it could bring vermin instead of goods, burn down the house, or simply fly away.<sup>75</sup>

75. Claude Lecouteux, *The Tradition of Household Spirits* (Rochester, Vt: Inner Traditions, 2013), 153–61; Linhart, *Hausgeister*, 213–55; Auning, *Lettschen*, passim; Schroeder, *Germanische*, 15–42; Franz Schönwerth, *Aus der Oberpfalz. Sitten und Sagen* (Augsburg, 1857), 393–96; Hermann Endrös and Alfred Weitnauer (eds.), *Allgäuer Sagen* (Altusried, 2014), 285. I would like to thank Birgit Kata for alerting me to this text.

The owner of a dragon grew rich. According to a popular saying, those who have a dragon get rich quickly and easily; we find this quoted by Goldast in 1661, but it was still current in Mecklenburg in the nineteenth century and in Silesia even in the early twentieth century.<sup>76</sup> Many tales claimed that extremely greedy people actively attempted to get a dragon. Both men and women featured as owners of dragons. There was no pejorative focus on women akin to that of the witchcraft imagination. The folktales characterized all owners of dragons very negatively. The tales presented them as witches, as people who were in league with Satan, or at least as devilish villains.<sup>77</sup> In spite of potential economic advantages, one should keep away from dragons and dragon owners under all circumstances.<sup>78</sup>

A minority of tales offered additional motifs. These were of secondary importance and never questioned or compromised the core ethical elements of the dragon tales just reviewed. Some tales claimed that the dragon, like the basilisk, hatched from a rooster's egg.<sup>79</sup> In some tales, the witch herself, not the Devil, transformed into a dragon.<sup>80</sup> Modern folktales presented the household dragon in more forms than early modern sources: it could appear as a flame or a snake, but also as a hen, a rooster or some other bird, as a mouse, a cat, a dog, or even as a fish.<sup>81</sup> In a few cases, the dragon appeared as a dwarfish creature.<sup>82</sup> It might be best to explain this as an atypical blending together of the dragon motif with that of anthropomorphic household spirits like brownies. A number of folktales focused on the idea that the dragon could be forced to drop its loot.<sup>83</sup> Obviously, this was a secondary motif. In witch trials, there was no room for it as it would have been very difficult to fit into a narrative that could be discussed at court.

This short survey of folktales clearly suggests that the dragon narrative remained largely stable between the sixteenth and early twentieth centuries. Early modern and modern dragon beliefs were not only very similar to each other, they were essentially identical. This is even more remarkable

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76. Richard Kühnau, *Schlesische Sagen* (Leipzig, 1910–1913), 3 vols., vol. 2, 17; Karl Bartsch, *Sagen, Märchen und Gebräuche aus Meklenburg [sic]*, 2 vols., (Wien: W. Braumüller, 1879), Norderstedt 2016, Bd. 1, 260.

77. See e.g. Linhart, *Hausgeister*, 237–41; Auning, *Lettischen*, 10, 15, 47, 49, 57, 59–60.

78. See e.g. Schroeder, *Germanische*, 22–27.

79. Auning, *Lettischen*, 16, 26, 43; Linhart, *Hausgeister*, 239.

80. Auning, *Lettischen*, 37–38.

81. Linhart, *Hausgeister*, 229–37; Schroeder, *Germanische*, 33–35; Auning, *Lettischen*, 4, 14, 24, 29, 40, 43, 47; Schönwerth, *Oberpfalz*, 393.

82. Schroeder, *Germanische*, 24–25.

83. See e.g. Linhart, *Hausgeister*, 252–53.

as understandings of witchcraft in general changed a great deal over the same period. The idea that owners of dragons would get rich very quickly was central to both early modern and modern dragon narratives. Both ascribed largely the same social positions to the owners of dragons.

Now that we have established the structural similarities between early modern and modern dragon beliefs it makes sense to look at the modern materials in greater detail. If we take a closer look at the nineteenth-century texts, we might discover patterns that help us gain a deeper understanding of the early modern sources. In other words: a more detailed analysis of later folktales might suggest a new way of looking at the early modern narratives which could reveal their full significance.

Of course, the dragon was just one of many household spirits that featured in folktales. There were theriomorphic and anthropomorphic household spirits. It comes as no surprise that anthropomorphic spirits—the brownie, the Kobold, the nisse—appeared more like persons with individual traits than did the theriomorphic ones. The household spirits that had more or less human form often saw eye-to-eye with the human beings in whose houses they lived. Even if they played childish tricks they had to be treated with some respect. The anthropomorphic spirit watched over the household. It (or rather he because the spirit usually appeared in male form) made sure that everybody in the house did his or her duty. Not only servants, but even the head of the household himself had to accept his authority. The spirit took on a role very like that of a respected and experienced elderly servant or even that of the householder's father who had retired but still expected his son to heed his advice. It is possible that the household spirit was originally the spirit of a dead ancestor. The anthropomorphic household spirit did not serve any individual, but rather worked for the family or the farmstead as a whole. In some folktales, the household spirit even opposed the householder if he failed to maintain good order on the homestead, or neglected the material interests of the farm.<sup>84</sup>

The idea that an anthropomorphic household spirit might steal for the family it served seems to be very old. Notker the Stammerer mentioned such spirits briefly in the late ninth century, and Burchard of Worms alluded to them early in the eleventh century.<sup>85</sup> However, this seems to have been very much an exception rather than the rule. In later folk belief, anthropomorphic

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84. Lecouteux, *Tradition*, passim; Linhart, *Hausgeister*, passim; Erika Lindig, *Hausgeister* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang GmbH, 1987), passim.

85. Lecouteux, *Tradition*, 91–92.

spirits supported the household in many ways but respected the property of others.<sup>86</sup>

In contrast, a theriomorphic household spirit was much less of a free agent, let alone a moral authority. Even though it might have distinct demonic traits it was mostly a servant who obeyed orders uncritically. Further, the theriomorphic spirit belonged to an individual rather than to a family or a household.<sup>87</sup>

The dragon of folktales was a theriomorphic household spirit par excellence. It did not give any advice. It helped its master or mistress only and exclusively by stealing for them. Even though some German folktales used the term “Kobold” (a term usually reserved for anthropomorphic household spirits) for the dragon, this appears to be a secondary development that fused names and imaginations together that originally had little in common.<sup>88</sup> In contrast to that, a tale from northern Bavaria emphasized the differences between the dragon and the Kobold vehemently.<sup>89</sup>

In modern folktales, the essential traits of the dragon were that it stole and that it worked for one concrete person. These ideas seem to have dominated early modern dragon beliefs, too. These motifs made it very easy to combine belief in dragons with the imagination of witchcraft. It was always one specific person, not a family or a household, who made a pact with the Devil. That the theriomorphic household spirit stole and had no moral authority suggested that it was a demonic creature. It is as if the popular belief in dragons invited a demonological interpretation.

According to the folktales, the dragon did not supply mere bare essentials needed for survival. It brought more than that; it made its owner rich.<sup>90</sup> Some folktales even claimed that the dragon stole grain from the poor to bring it to the wealthy.<sup>91</sup> It ruined many in order to allow a few to live a life of luxury. Thus, the dragon was an agent of a redistribution of wealth that ran completely contrary to the moral economy of the village and to Christian charity. Some folktales stressed that the dragon changed the relationship between

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86. Lecouteux, *Tradition*, passim; Linhart, *Hausgeister*, passim; Lindig, *Hausgeister*, passim. Exceptions in Schroeder, *Germanische*, 7–9.

87. Linhart, *Hausgeister*, 224, 239–40.

88. Linhart, *Hausgeister*, 213, 222–23, 226. Ostling, *Between*, 227–38 is certainly correct insofar as these terms are not accurate in a taxonomic or quasi-Linnean way. However, they tend to stand for relatively concrete imaginary beings on the characteristics of which the contemporaries seem to have largely agreed.

89. Linhart, *Hausgeister*, 162–63.

90. *Ibid.*, 221, 226–27, 248–51.

91. *Ibid.*, 220, 223, 247.

the head of a peasant household and his servants. As the dragon kept bringing large amounts of produce, farmhands and maidservants had to work harder and longer to process this produce—to churn the milk into butter, to thresh the grain, and so on.<sup>92</sup> In a way, the dragon spurred the farmer to exploit his servants. With a surplus of produce that needed to be processed, it made economic sense for the farmer to make his employees work more and more. Thus, the owner of a dragon was not only extremely avaricious, a thief, and a witch; he (or she) was also an exploiter. In a tale from Lusatia, an affluent woman who owed her wealth to a dragon fell very ill. She suffered greatly for days, but death would not release her from the pain. She could finally die only after she had been laid upon a dung heap.<sup>93</sup> This drastic fantasy about pain and public humiliation reveals just how much traditional village communities resented “parvenus” who had managed to better their social standing.

Baltic folktales maintained that one could buy a dragon in the “dragon house” at Riga. A dragon cost up to 300 rubles.<sup>94</sup> At first glance, it seems strange that one could buy a spirit being. It seems no less strange that dragons that clearly had to do with the agrarian economy were supposedly sold in one of the most important urban centers of the Baltic Sea. If we try to take these magical motifs seriously i.e. to understand them according to their own logic, they make perfect sense. The dragon’s main task was profane: it had to bring material goods. Folktales confirmed and emphasized this basic motif when they claimed that one could get the dragon itself in a very profane and material way: one could simply buy one in a shop. An elaborate magical ritual was unnecessary. A formal pact with the Devil was not needed. As the folktales presented the dragon as a creature of economic magic, it was logically consistent to explain that the dragon itself was a tradable commodity, a kind of merchandise. The sale of dragons, presented as an essentially profane business transaction, took place in a shop in an important center of commerce, Riga. The dragon house was in Riga not in spite of the fact that Riga was a volatile merchant city but because of this: the trade hub Riga was the place for doing business, not the villages of its hinterland.<sup>95</sup>

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92. Schroeder, *Germanische*, 32–33, 54–55; Auning, *Lettischen*, 7–10, 51–53. In an interesting variant the dragon even torments its owner: it relentlessly demands to be given new tasks to fulfill: see Auning, *Lettischen*, 49.

93. Linhart, *Hausgeister*, 257.

94. Schroeder, *Germanische*, 16–17; Auning, *Lettischen*, 8–10, 16, 26, 31, 34, 43, 47–50, 59. Dragons were also on offer at Daugavpils/Dünaburg, another important trade center in Latvia, Auning, *Lettischen*, 64.

95. Schroeder suggested a radically different interpretation: based on his poorly grounded assumption that the dragon narrative originated in Germany he claimed that

For fear of going to hell as a punishment for having a dragon, the protagonists of some folktales tried to get rid of the demonic spirit. However, this was only possible if they gave up all of their worldly possessions or if they sold the dragon for less than it was worth.<sup>96</sup> Here, the economic dimension of dragon beliefs becomes absolutely clear. Keeping a dragon was ruthless and aggressive, extremely profit-oriented economic behavior. This could only be offset by reckless and self-damaging economic behavior: one had to incur massive losses willingly.

A number of folktales maintained that dragons liked to hide in old hubs of wagon wheels.<sup>97</sup> This motif only makes sense if we take into account that the rural population often kept coins hidden in old hubs.<sup>98</sup> This seems to have been the early modern equivalent of money “hidden under the mattress.” If folktales said that dragons hid in places where money was usually hidden, they essentially identified the dragon with money. Magical treasure tales declared time and again that a treasure was not an inanimate object. It could turn itself into worthless material in order to fool the treasure hunters. The dragon allegedly did the same: if a curious person wanted to see it, it transformed into coal and dirt.<sup>99</sup> We have already pointed out that the dragon supposedly brought money, not just produce. Thus, it had already overcome the confines of the subsistence economy and begun to enter the realm of the market economy and monetary exchange. In this context, it made sense to identify the dragon that brought desirable goods directly with money.

The results of our detailed survey of folktales are unequivocal: the folktales about dragons were really about economics. Economic behavior, especially economic behavior condemned as antisocial and selfish was at the center of the narrative. The tales condemned profit orientation, competition, and social climbing. They did so with considerable aggressiveness. Folktales about anthropomorphic household spirits were essentially cautionary tales: their main point was to warn both the householder as well as his servants to treat each other fairly and to cooperate for the best of the household. Folktales about dragons had a decidedly different and much harsher tone; they did not really warn, they threatened. They denounced certain types of behavior not only as unacceptable but as outright evil.

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the belief in dragons had first taken root in Riga, the town where German influence was strongest. This, according to Schroeder, made the peasants believe that they could buy dragons in Riga, Schroeder, *Germanische*, 41.

96. Linhart, *Hausgeister*, 256–57.

97. Schroeder, *Germanische*, 36; Auning, *Lettischen*, 12, 22.

98. Staatsarchiv Sigmaringen Ho 1 T7, 1224.

99. Auning, *Lettischen*, 50.

At no point did modern dragon narratives run contrary to the general ideas expressed in the early modern materials. Ideas about values and acceptable behavior, the moral and magical economy of the rural areas of the nineteenth century, outside of the rising urban centers and industrial areas, seem to have changed very little since the early modern period. The results of our detailed study of modern folktales about dragons lead us to stress the economic aspects of early modern narratives about dragons even more. We found a mindset very similar to the economic mentality expressed in folktales in the background of early modern criminal trials against alleged dragon-witches. This mindset also rejected profit-oriented behavior and upward social mobility connected with it. Modern folktales would suggest regarding this mindset not simply as the background of early modern dragon beliefs but as their precondition and the key to their interpretation.

The economic mentality shaped a complex of magical thoughts and ideas. We find these documented in early modern ethnological writings and scientific debates as well as in witch trials. Accusations of witchcraft were the most aggressive form that the criticism of unwanted economic behavior could take. Whoever produced or sold more than other members of the local community in comparable circumstances was likely to be suspected of wrongdoing. It is well-established that early modern rural and small-town communities had a deep dislike of competition and economic innovation.<sup>100</sup> Belief in the dragon explained economic success and social climbing in the most negative way imaginable. It explained economic gain through magical theft perpetrated with the help of a demon in the shape of a dragon. Very much in keeping with George Foster's account of the "image of limited good," one person's profit was denounced as the loss of all the others.<sup>101</sup> I have dealt with the magical significance of this concept in detail elsewhere.<sup>102</sup> Suffice it to say here, that according to the anthropological model of limited good, preindustrial rural societies tend to behave as if the economy was a zero-sum game. The moral economy of such societies seems to be based on

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100. George Foster, "Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good," *American Anthropologist* 67 (1965): 293–315.

101. Foster, "Peasant Society;" Winfried Schulze, "Vom Gemeinnutz zum Eigennutz," *Historische Zeitschrift* 243 (1986), 591–626; Elodie Lecuppre-Desjardin (ed.), *De bono communi: The Discourse and Practice of the Common Good in the European City (13th - 16th c.)* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010); Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches* (New York: Random House, 1987, repr. London: Harper Perennial, 2004), 289–372.

102. Johannes Dillinger, "The Good Magicians," in Kathryn Edwards (ed.), *Everyday Magic in Early Modern Europe* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 105–26; Dillinger, *Magical*, 190–203.

the assumption that all goods (grain, milk, arable ground but also fertility itself) are only available in limited quantities that can never be increased. On a different level, the work of the guilds and mercantilism seem at least in part to have been based on very similar assumptions. If one imagines the economy as a zero-sum game, whenever one individual increases his share of all the available goods, all others will necessarily lose. Thus, every kind of behavior that was apt to improve one's economic situation significantly—technical innovations, readiness to engage in competition, or simply parsimony or willingness to work harder and longer than others—was frowned upon by the local communities. If somebody managed to better their economic position in any such way, the community they lived in was likely to react negatively as if they had stolen their surplus income from all the others. Alleged dragon owners, persons like the Ramholds, Hönin, Ecksteinin, Liebermännin, or Gemeinths, had violated the norms of the Limited Good society. They had managed to actively improve their economic situation, while their neighbors interpreted their relative wealth as the result of a kind of magical theft: allegedly, they had taken what belonged to others in order to increase their own share of goods. The dragon was the very embodiment of the Limited Good mentality, and thus also embodied an implicit but very harsh critique of individual accumulation or proto-capitalist behavior.

#### CONCLUSION

The household dragon was an agent of magical theft. Dragon beliefs provided a highly negative interpretation of economic gain and upward social mobility connected with it. There were no significant differences between early modern dragon beliefs documented in witch trials, early ethnography and science, and modern dragon beliefs documented in folktales. The people accused of being dragon-witches could be seen as pioneers of capitalism. They wanted to make a profit and to attain a higher social position. They worked more and harder than their neighbors and apparently did not care if they alienated them by violating norms of social and economic behavior. In a widely influential argument, Alan Macfarlane and Keith Thomas claimed that there was a direct connection between individualism, Protestantism, and accusations of witchcraft.<sup>103</sup> Our sources point in a rather different direction, and they suggest something a lot more concrete: there was a direct connection between accusations of witchcraft and economic behavior that the local community rejected as ruthless and aggressive.

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103. Dillinger, *Hexen*, 129–30.

Without a convincing basis in recent witchcraft research, Schneider suggested that the eradication of alleged witches was a precondition for the spread of capitalism because magic and contact with the spirit world provided an alternative to the rising urban market economy.<sup>104</sup> Our findings indicate almost the opposite: spirit beliefs and witch trials connected with them could constitute a major obstacle to the rural pioneers of a profit-based economy. Witch hunts did not lead to a decline of the Limited Good mentality as Schneider suggests; on the contrary, the witch hunts were deeply influenced by and at least in part were an expression of that mentality. Similar mentalities and magical beliefs seem to affect the development of capitalist economies in modern Africa.<sup>105</sup>

This does not mean that witchcraft accusations were merely a trick, i.e. that people whose economic behavior had made them extremely unpopular were accused of having a dragon simply in order to get rid of them. On the contrary, the genuine belief in dragons and witches fitted seamlessly into a context of social tensions and economic conflicts. In the final analysis, trials against alleged dragon-witches punished individualistic, profit-oriented economic activities. Witch trials were all about penalizing behavior the local community rejected.<sup>106</sup>

It might be permissible to end this text with a speculation. Instead of signing his pictures, Lucas Cranach painted a winged snake that had a crown on its head and ring in its mouth in the margins. As Cranach came from eastern Germany, he was certainly as familiar as Luther with the belief in dragons. Did Cranach, who was a very successful artist, choose the dragon as his symbol in order to comment in a daring, self-ironic way on his own rise into the upper class?

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104. Jane Schneider, "Spirits and the Spirit of Capitalism," in *Religious Orthodoxy and Popular Faith in European Society*, ed. Ellen Badone (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 24–54.

105. Austen, *Moral*; Bernard Gechiko Nyabwari and Dickson Nkonge Kagema, "The Impact of Magic and Witchcraft in the Social, Economic, Political and Spiritual Life of African Communities," *International Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education* 1 (2014): 9–18; Boris Gershman, "Witchcraft Beliefs and the Erosion of Social Capital: Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa and Beyond," *Journal of Development Economics* 120 (2016): 182–208; Edward Miguel, "Poverty and Witch Killing," *Review of Economic Studies* 72 (2005): 1153–72.

106. This pattern has been called the "Evil People Paradigm." Dillinger, *Evil*, 79–97; Dillinger, *Hexen*, 132–35.