

Livonian Werewolves, 1500-1700s: A Sociological Assessment of Their Historical Significance and Origins through the Case of Old Thiess

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Abstract : This paper seeks to do an in-depth investigation on the phenomenon of Early Modern era (1500-1700s) Livonian werewolves. Noting their uniqueness in comparison to contemporaneous werewolves hailing from other geographic areas, the paper suggests that the Livonian werewolf is a metaphor for Livonian society at that time, one which was characterized by social turmoil and strict class hierarchy. This metaphor was utilized by different classes to establish their own interests in society, and thus the paper concludes that the werewolf is a mutable artifact whose value is contingent on its social context. This is demonstrated by the particular case of Old Thiess—a poor, elderly Livonian peasant who gave an unorthodox and anomalous testimony when accused of being a werewolf. In his court statement, it is shown how Thiess was, in fact, alluding to social tensions by lambasting the rich German elite and establishing the righteousness of the peasantry, of which he was a member. A close reading method was utilized on the trial transcript of Old Thiess with heavy reference to Carlo Ginzburg and Bruce Lincoln's collaborative work *Old Thiess, a Livonian werewolf: a classic case in comparative perspective*. Through a contextual reading of Livonia's social atmosphere, the paper draws connections between the content of the trial to wider societal disturbances happening at the time. The thesis—that the werewolf is a flexible metaphor for the social milieu—is further buttressed by numerous contemporaneous sources that had similar messages as Thiess' transcript, which are discussed as well.

Keywords : early-modern baltic, Livonia, Old Thiess, social history, werewolves

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