Unlocking new scholarship from Europe's richest witch trial archive

The Oxford "Witches of Lorraine" database represents an exceptional opportunity for methodologically innovative research into early modern persecution. Despite Robin Briggs's foundational work, this dataset of **~400 complete trial dossiers** (Ox +2) from the Duchy of Lorraine (1553-1657) remains significantly underutilized for quantitative analysis, network mapping, and interdisciplinary investigation. The archive's unusual completeness—including witness depositions, interrogation transcripts, and outcome records with coded variables for economic status, gender, and marital status—makes it uniquely suited to approaches that have transformed witch trial scholarship elsewhere but have never been systematically applied to Lorraine. (ox)

This research agenda identifies five categories of genuinely novel inquiry: computational and network approaches never attempted with Lorraine data; interdisciplinary connections to climate, economic, and epidemiological history; comparative studies exploiting Lorraine's distinctive features; understudied variables within the existing dataset; and methodological innovations from adjacent fields.

The Lorraine archive's distinctive scholarly value

The Lorraine trial records survive because they were preserved among ducal fiscal records (H-Net) to justify expenditure—a preservation bias that paradoxically makes them exceptionally complete. Mark Greengrass describes them as "perhaps the richest surviving archive of witchcraft trials to be found in Europe." (Oxford University Press +2) Each complete dossier typically contains **15-25 witness depositions**, interrogation transcripts, records of confrontations between accused and accusers, and torture interrogation records. (Oxford Academic) This documentation depth permits analysis impossible with the fragmentary records surviving from most other jurisdictions.

The persecution's intensity was extraordinary: approximately **2,000 trials** occurred between 1570 and 1630 (H-Net) against a population of only ~300,000, yielding an **80% execution rate**. (H-Net) (Springer) This intensity was exceeded only by the neighboring Duchy of Luxembourg and the Electorate of Cologne. Yet unlike concentrated "witch panics" elsewhere, Lorraine's trials were distributed across time and space, with only one concentrated hunt (late 1620s, ~50 victims). (Springer) This pattern suggests ongoing community-level dynamics rather than panic-driven chain reactions—making Lorraine ideal for studying the "normal" operation of witch belief.

Robin Briggs's central argument—that witch trials emerged from village-level social tensions rather than elite imposition—has become influential (H-France) (H-Net) but has never been rigorously tested with the quantitative methods now standard in historical social science. (H-France) His finding that evidence typically dated back **12+ years** before formal accusation, and that most people with witch reputations were never prosecuted, (H-Net) suggests complex social filtering mechanisms (H-Net) that network analysis could illuminate.

Network analysis has never been applied to Lorraine

Despite the explosion of network analysis in historical research, no study has systematically mapped accusation networks in the Lorraine database. This represents perhaps the most significant methodological gap. The

Survey of Scottish Witchcraft (Julian Goodare et al., University of Edinburgh) Wikipedia has demonstrated what's possible: its 3,837 accused individuals Wikipedia have been mapped using Gephi and exported to Wikidata as linked open data. Daniel Howlett's Salem Networks Project successfully identified 665 unique relationships among 91 individuals using NodeXL and Palladio. Endicott The Santa Fe Institute's 2024 study by Doten-Snitker et al. tracked "ideational diffusion" of witch trials across 553 Central European cities. ScienceBlog santafe

Lorraine's data structure is ideally suited for network analysis because trial records document:

- **Accusers and accused** with named relationships (neighbor, kin, client)
- **Witnesses** and their stated connections to both parties
- **Accomplices named under torture**, creating chains linking trials
- **Familial relationships** documented in depositions
- **Geographic proximity** through village and parish identification

Specific network questions that could be addressed include: What is the average "degree of separation" between accused witches within trial clusters? Do accusation networks show small-world properties? Are there identifiable "bridge" individuals who connected accusation clusters across communities? Does naming accomplices under torture increase or decrease survival probability? What structural positions in village networks predict vulnerability to accusation?

The software infrastructure exists: **Gephi** for complex network visualization, **Palladio** (Stanford) for accessible drag-and-drop analysis, and **NodeXL** for Excel-based computation. What's needed is systematic coding of relationship data from Briggs's trial summaries into edge lists suitable for network import.

Climate and economic correlations remain untested for Lorraine specifically

Wolfgang Behringer's climate thesis—that witch persecution correlated with Little Ice Age crop failures—and Emily Oster's economic analysis have established that environmental stress correlates with trial intensity at the aggregate European level. Oster found statistically significant inverse relationships between temperature and trial frequency using data from 1520-1770. SSRN Yet these correlations have never been tested at the **granular local level** where Lorraine's detailed records would permit precise analysis.

Lorraine's trial dates can be correlated with:

- **Christian Pfister's Historical Weather Indices** from Switzerland (proximate and well-documented)
- **Grain price series** from regional markets
- **Plague and epidemic records** for the Rhine-Moselle region
- **Military movements** during the Thirty Years' War (which ended Lorraine's persecution when French occupation began in the 1630s)

The 1627 witch-hunt that produced at least 50 victims (Springer) coincides with what Behringer identified as a particularly cold May in 1626 that triggered renewed calls among Franconian peasants for witch persecution. Testing whether Lorraine's trial clustering correlates with the same climate proxies would either validate or complicate the climate thesis.

Critically, **Leeson and Russ's 2018 challenge** to the climate thesis—arguing that religious-market competition between Catholics and Protestants better explains trial intensity— (Peterleeson)can also be tested in Lorraine. The duchy maintained Catholic orthodoxy but bordered Protestant territories; the geographic distribution of trials relative to confessional boundaries has never been mapped.

The devineresse distinction offers untapped analytical potential

Briggs documents that **devins-guérisseurs** (cunning folk/diviners) comprised a substantial share of Lorraine accusations, (Grokipedia) but no systematic analysis has distinguished outcomes for divination charges versus maleficium (harmful magic). This distinction is legally and conceptually significant: divination without evidence of diabolical pact could be treated as lesser "superstition" rather than capital heresy.

The research questions here are precise and answerable from existing data:

- Did accused diviners have different conviction rates than those charged with harmful magic?
- Were sentences for divination-related charges less severe?
- What factors predicted escalation from divination to full witchcraft charges?
- Did communities treat cunning folk differently based on whether their services had been used locally?

In Essex, England, only 4 of 400 witchcraft trials involved cunning folk; (Wikipedia) in Danish Jutland, only 10% of 1,519 cases. (DIG) Lorraine figures remain **unquantified**—a straightforward coding exercise could establish comparative baselines. Briggs's observation that "witchcraft was actually perceived as having strong therapeutic possibilities"—that accused witches could be induced to remove curses—suggests a functional ambiguity in witch identity (Oxford University Press) that divination charges may have exploited. (Amazon) (Oxford University Press)

Outcome prediction modeling has never been attempted

Briggs reports a **79% conviction rate** with "very little difference by gender," (H-Net) but no multivariate analysis has identified which combinations of variables predict trial outcomes. (Springer) The Lorraine database includes coded variables for:

- **Economic status**: Destitute / Poor / Comfortable / Wealthy
- **Gender**: Male (~29%) / Female (~71%)
- **Marital status**: Including widowhood
- **Trial outcome**: Execution / Banishment / Release [R] / Death in prison / Flight/Escape

- **Temporal information**: Trial dates
- **Geographic information**: Location and parish

These variables permit logistic regression or survival analysis asking: controlling for economic status, does gender affect outcome? Does widowhood increase execution probability independent of poverty? Did outcomes vary systematically by geographic location or time period? Did the Change de Nancy's advisory opinions (which local courts followed only ~50% of the time) correlate with specific defendant characteristics? H-Net H-Net

The Scottish data demonstrates that judicial structure dramatically affected outcomes: local courts executed ~90% of accused, while the central Judiciary Court executed only 55%. Wikipedia Lorraine's unusual system—where local courts were required to consult but not obey the Change de Nancy—permits testing whether advisory rather than mandatory appellate review affected outcomes. H-Net

German-speaking Lorraine remains almost entirely unstudied

William Monter explicitly identifies "a shortage of comparable trial narratives from Lorraine's sizable German-speaking population" as the most serious gap in current scholarship. H-Net This is analytically significant because German-speaking Lorraine showed distinctive patterns: median sabbat attendance was **at least twice** that in French-speaking Lorraine, and confessions included "lurid fantasies" (cooking babies, Black Masses) that "never crossed Lorraine's language frontier." H-Net

This linguistic boundary within a single jurisdiction offers a natural experiment for testing cultural transmission of witch beliefs. Did the same legal system produce different confession content depending on the linguistic community? Were conviction rates similar despite different confession patterns? Did the "sabbat size" difference reflect different interrogation practices or different folk beliefs?

The few trial records from German-speaking districts include St. Hippolyte, an easternmost winegrowing village on the Alsatian plain that experienced "micro-hunts of exceptional severity." H-Net Systematic comparison of this district with French-speaking areas would illuminate how cultural context shaped persecution dynamics within identical legal frameworks.

Kinship and inheritance patterns demand network reconstruction

Briggs finds that "stepfamilies were the most frequent sites of witchcraft accusations," H-France H-Net and modern African witchcraft research identifies "the dark side of kinship"—accusations commonly occurring within family systems. Medium Yet no systematic network mapping of kinship relationships in Lorraine accusations has been attempted.

The trial records document:

- **Intergenerational witch reputations**: Children of executed witches were "increasingly likely to be thought to have inherited evil powers" H-Net

- **Stepfamily dynamics**: "The folkloric commonplace of the wicked stepmother was an exaggeration of a well-known phenomenon" (H-France) (H-Net)
- **Property disputes**: Quarrels over inheritance lay behind many accusations (H-Net)
- **Defense mobilization**: Some families organized petitions and witnesses for defense

Research questions include: How many accusations involved family members? What was the kinship distance between accusers and accused? Did property inheritance timing correlate with accusation timing? Were families with executed members more or less likely to face subsequent accusations? What family defense strategies succeeded?

The genealogical reconstruction required is labor-intensive but feasible from Briggs's detailed trial summaries, which document family relationships mentioned in depositions.

Text mining could reveal confession standardization over time

Modern NLP approaches—topic modeling with **MALLET** or **LDA**, named entity recognition, and narrative pattern analysis—have been applied to historical documents including medieval Latin charters and early modern court records. (Uni-hamburg) No such analysis has been attempted on Lorraine trial transcripts.

The research questions are methodologically sophisticated:

- Do confession narratives show increasing standardization over time, suggesting interrogator influence?
- Can text mining identify distinct "schools" of demonological questioning associated with different courts or periods?
- Do confessions from French-speaking and German-speaking Lorraine show systematically different vocabulary or narrative structures?
- What named entities (demons, sabbat locations, accomplices) recur across confessions, and do they cluster geographically or temporally?

Briggs's trial summaries include substantial excerpts from interrogations in English translation. While full NLP analysis would require returning to the original French/German documents in Nancy's archives, pattern analysis of the summaries could identify which records merit deeper investigation.

Medieval Latin NER projects have achieved F1 scores of **0.63-0.89** depending on document period; early modern French presents similar challenges of non-standardized spelling and evolving naming conventions. (Journal of the Association for I…) The HisMeTag tagger developed for Hispanic medieval texts demonstrates feasibility. (Journal of the Association for I…)

GIS mapping could reveal diffusion patterns invisible in text

The Scottish Witchcraft database has been mapped using LeafletJS (Ed) and ArcGIS StoryMaps, revealing

concentration in Edinburgh and Glasgow and demographic patterns obscured in tabular data. The Santa Fe Institute study tracked how witch trials spread through trade and social networks across Central European cities. ScienceBlog santafe

Lorraine's geographic data permits:

- **Heat mapping** of trial density by village and parish
- **Diffusion analysis** of whether trials spread from initial outbreak points
- **Correlation mapping** of trial locations against environmental variables (river systems, trade routes, parish boundaries, proximity to borders)
- **Temporal animation** of persecution spread over the 1570-1630 period

The Briggs book includes tables of geographic distribution that have never been converted to spatial datasets. The county of Blâmont and the lands of the chapter of Saint-Dié show distinctive patterns that Briggs examined narratively; Oxford Academic GIS analysis could test whether these patterns reflect geographic diffusion, shared environmental conditions, or administrative factors.

Comparative database integration would multiply analytical power

The **Survey of Scottish Witchcraft** (3,837 accused, 1563-1736) Ed and the **Leeson-Russ dataset** (43,000+ trials across 21 countries) Peterleeson exist in downloadable formats. No systematic comparison with Lorraine has been attempted.

Specific comparative questions:

- Does Lorraine's ~29% male accused rate differ significantly from Scotland's ~15%? Wikipedia What explains the variation?
- Did Lorraine's execution rate (~80%) exceed Scotland's after controlling for legal structure?
- Does the correlation between economic status and outcome hold across jurisdictions?
- Did trial timing in Lorraine correlate with trial timing elsewhere, suggesting macro-level triggers?

The neighboring Duchy of Bar—ruled by the same dukes but with compulsory appeals to two different courts—showed "much lower incidence of witch trials and executions." H-Net This natural experiment in appellate structure has been noted but never quantitatively analyzed.

Methodological priorities for maximizing scholarly impact

The most impactful interventions would require relatively modest investment:

First priority: Standardized variable coding. Converting Briggs's ~400 trial summaries into a structured database with standardized fields for all documented variables would enable all subsequent quantitative

analysis. The Scottish model (634 active fields, complex table relationships) provides a template.

Second priority: Network relationship extraction. Coding accuser-accused-witness relationships as edge lists would permit immediate network analysis without requiring new archival research.

Third priority: Wikidata integration. Following Edinburgh's 2019 export of Scottish data to Wikidata as linked open data (Ed) would make Lorraine data interoperable with other historical databases and enable comparative queries.

Fourth priority: GIS geocoding. Assigning coordinates to villages and parishes mentioned in trials would enable spatial analysis.

Fifth priority: Climate/economic correlation. Linking trial dates to existing climate proxy and grain price series requires no new data collection, only temporal alignment.

These priorities reflect the principle of maximum analytical leverage from existing data. The Lorraine archive's exceptional richness has been exploited for qualitative microhistory but never for the systematic quantitative approaches that have transformed witch trial scholarship elsewhere. The database's structured fields for economic status, gender, marital status, and outcomes—variables rarely available in other archives—make Lorraine uniquely suited to testing hypotheses about persecution vulnerability that have been proposed but never rigorously evaluated.

Conclusion: A research program for the next decade

The Lorraine witchcraft database represents an underexploited asset for early modern social history. Briggs's foundational qualitative work established key interpretive frameworks—witchcraft as village-level social process, (H-Net) the therapeutic dimension of witch belief, (Amazon) the significance of male witches—but these interpretations have never been systematically tested against the data that generated them.

The most promising research directions combine methodological innovation with substantive historical questions: network analysis to test the community-conflict model; outcome modeling to identify persecution vulnerability factors; comparative analysis to establish Lorraine's place in broader patterns; and interdisciplinary integration to connect trial timing with environmental and economic variables.

What makes these directions genuinely novel is not their individual components—network analysis, quantitative modeling, and GIS mapping are well-established methods—but their application to Lorraine's exceptionally complete data. The archive's preservation of complete trial dossiers with named relationships, coded economic status, and documented outcomes creates analytical possibilities unavailable from the fragmentary records surviving elsewhere. The research agenda outlined here would not merely add to existing scholarship but potentially transform understanding of how witch persecution actually operated at the community level where accusations originated.