

In word and thread

Restoration of Merga Bien

Dear Merga,

I write your name as it has been preserved in the archives: Merga Bien, Fulda, 1603. A name among many others, recorded in a period in which the witch persecutions in the Prince-Abbey of Fulda reached an unprecedented intensity. Under the rule of Prince-Abbot Balthasar von Dernbach, between 1603 and 1606 an estimated 200 to 250 people were accused, convicted, and executed. These were not isolated events, but a systematic persecution, driven by religious convictions, legal structures, and a climate of fear.

You were one of the victims.

You were arrested on 19 June 1603. Shortly afterwards, your husband declared that you were pregnant. He tried to make use of an existing legal principle: that an unborn child deserved protection and that an execution should be postponed until after the birth. In several European jurisdictions, this was recognized as *pleading the belly*. It was not a guarantee of acquittal, but it could create time. That time was not granted to you.

You were imprisoned, interrogated, and confronted with accusations that went beyond a single charge. As in many trials of that period, your case was expanded with additional suspicions, based on statements from others who were themselves under pressure. In this way, a network of accusations grew, in which each name could draw in the next.

What remains in the sources is fragmentary, but the pattern is clear. You were accused of witchcraft and subjected to torture. Torture was not an exception, but an embedded part of the interrogation. It served to extract confessions when evidence was lacking. And evidence was almost always lacking. Confessions obtained under such circumstances then formed the core of the proof. They were seen as confirmation of what was already assumed.

In your confession, insofar as it has been preserved, mention was made of a pact with the devil and of gatherings with other alleged witches. Such elements recur in many trials. They say less about you and more about the framework of thought of the judges and interrogators. Yet they were used against you as conclusive proof.

The legal procedure had the form of justice, but in many cases the outcome had already been decided.

The Fulda trials were not an isolated phenomenon. They formed part of a broader wave of persecutions in the Holy Roman Empire, where religious tensions, political instability, and social insecurity reinforced one another. The Counter-Reformation played an important role in the region. Authorities sought to enforce religious purity. Deviations, real or perceived, were increasingly less tolerated. At the same time, poor harvests, disease, and economic pressure created a growing need to identify causes and assign blame.

Within that context, women like you became vulnerable. Not because you were exceptional, but because within the prevailing worldview you could be seen as plausible perpetrators. The combination of social position, gender, and reputation was often enough to arouse suspicion. Women were the ideal scapegoat.

What makes your case particular is the mention of your pregnancy. It shows how even existing legal protections could be ignored when the pressure to convict became strong enough. In the autumn of

1603, you were sentenced to death. As was customary in Fulda, this meant death at the stake. The execution was not a private event, but a public moment, intended as a warning and a confirmation of order. What exactly passed through you, we do not know. The sources record only the outcome.

Your story was thus inscribed into a series of trials that would continue for years, and that only came to an end when critical voices slowly began to find space again. What remains are not complete life stories, but traces. Names, dates, accusations. Rarely does it become visible who someone was before the accusation. Or how someone lived, worked, loved, cared. The archives preserve only the accusation.

That is why I started MICCA: a project in which I give form, in thread, to the stories of the victims. For you, I created a triptych: three frames that together form one whole. Each frame carries a bindrune, composed of signs representing strength, courage, and love. Runes were once letters, but also carriers of meaning, used in a world where language, symbolism, and belief were closely intertwined. Combined into bindrunes, they reinforce one another, just as memory becomes stronger when it takes form.

The triptych is part of a larger whole. MICCA is my way of not only naming the victims of the witch persecutions as a group, but of making them individually visible again. In Europe alone, tens of thousands of people were executed on charges of witchcraft.

What I do is limited. I cannot restore history. I cannot change the outcome. But I can refuse that your name exists only as part of an accusation. That is why I repeat it here and dedicate this magical triptych to you.

Rest now, Merga. The trials are over. The archives fall silent. Our thread endures.

With much love,
Micca