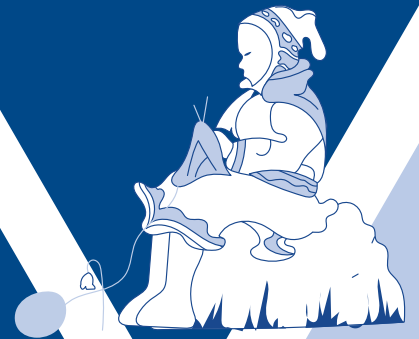
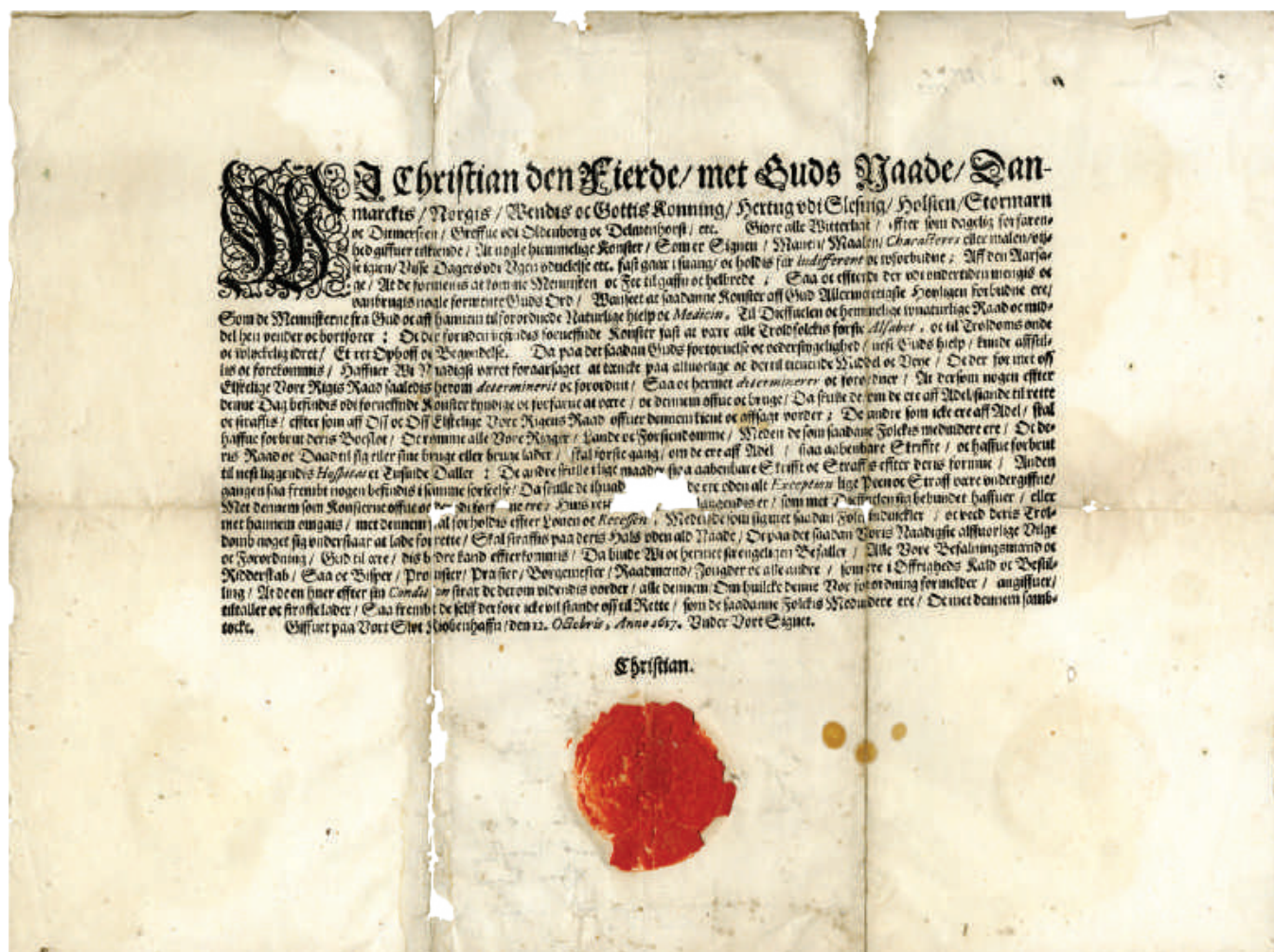


THE CONSTRUCTION OF EUROPE

HISTORY, MEMORY AND MYTH OF
EUROPEANNESS OVER 1000 YEARS





Royal Decree regarding witch hunt, 12-10-1617, Copenhagen (Denmark).

1 folio sheet, printed and sealed charter on paper; 30 x 22 cm.

National Archives of Norway – Regional State Archive of Stavanger.

Ref. Code: SAS/ A-101870/ Oa/ L0002/ 0002, nr. 38.

Royal Decree Regarding Witch Hunt

The laws in most European states during the Early Modern Period were strongly influenced by Christianity and the Christian Church. Denmark and Norway were no exceptions, as we can see in this royal decree on witch hunt.

In 1617, on the centenary of the Reformation, Christian IV (1577–1648), King of Denmark and Norway issued a decree abolishing witchcraft. The King, like everybody else believed in the existence of magic and witchcraft. The decree on sorcerers and their fellows, known as *The Sorcery Ordinance*, was in keeping with the spiritual austerity initiated by the state and the Church. The centenary of the Reformation was seen as a fitting time for the Church and the king to restore Christian morality and tighten their grip in the fight against, what they saw as, the sinful way of life of the people.

The decree represented a turning point in the prosecution of sorcery, which up to then had been seen as a harmless activity used to cure illness in people and livestock. But it was now determined that this was contrary to the law of God and the first step on the road to the

Devil. In the decree, the authorities criminalised not only harmful sorcery (*maleficium* or black magic) but also white magic, which was not considered harmful to others. This brought secular law in line with the church view on white magic.

The decree differentiated between white and black magic in terms of punishment. While the practitioners of white magic were punished economically and faced banishment, practitioners of black magic, ‘the right wizards’ who had made a covenant with the Devil, were to be burned at the stake. The decree also proscribed punishment for those clients who took counsel from such practitioners. In addition, state officials were ordered to prosecute any wizards or clients that they knew.

An estimated 2.000 witchcraft cases were sent to court in Norway in the 16th and 17th centuries. Around 350 people were executed, most of them burned at the stake. The last death sentence for witchcraft in Norway was executed in 1695. Several witchcraft cases were brought to court during the 18th century, but no one was sentenced to death.