

SUMMARY

*Social Discipline in Early Modern Livland.
Proceedings of Sodomy Cases in Pärnu
County Court in 17th–19th Century*

In the last decades, historical research has taken a closer look at how social discipline and public welfare were implemented in the early modern state. It gave rise to the term “new morality”, which refers to the attempts of state authorities to standardise their subjects’ behaviour through laws and orders regulating morality since the 16th century refers. The given trend was evident also in early modern Livland and Estland where church, local courts and government became involved in proceedings regarding behaviour (including sexual offences) which previously had not been constantly pursued on the state level. From 1669–1818, the main bulk of sexual offence cases – excluding the cases of illegitimacy – in the Pärnu county court were 78 cases of sodomy. This article looks at those cases in the context of early modern social changes as an example of how the relationship between the state and an individual changed and assesses the administrative capacity of local government, as it then was, from the socio-ideological viewpoint.

According to early modern understanding, sodomy was “against nature” and a cardinal sin revealing the wrath of god against the whole society and resulting in major disasters: crop failure, plague and famine. Religious awareness among Livland peasants can be witnessed from court materials which describe local peasants’ knowledge and world-view on the matter. According to these materials, peasants were aware of Christian doctrines in a syncretic-dualistic way – the opposition of a strict and merciful god vs the tempting devil – already by the end of the 17th century.

Sodomy was also considered a serious offence in early modern society. Since it was despicable not the least for the defendant himself, it was referred to as a “silent sin” and, therefore, the relevant cases were brought to the attention of the court only if somebody walked in on the act and brought it to light on personal moral grounds. All in all, 14 people were sentenced to death for sodomy in the Pärnu county court from 1669–1818. When sodomy could not be fully proved, the person was sentenced to hard labour, public flogging and public repentance. The final two punishments served as a disciplinary measure for the society since they disgraced the convicted offender.

The early modern church as well as the court saw bestiality mainly as an indulgence in senseless physical and demonic urges, with these two institutions working together towards shaping the ideas and behaviour of local peasants. Tightening restrictions on one’s physical behaviour was a method in early modern Europe that helped to secure social control in society and was exercised in the Baltic provinces as well as the rest of Europe both ideologically and in practice.