



Who Burned the Witches?

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The stench of their burning is with us yet. The stakes and gibbets where witches perished by the tens of thousands during early modern times still stand in popular imagination. For historians, the so-called great European witch-hunt has been a much-vexed issue, one easily contorted to suit the prejudices of every age.

Since the Enlightenment, rationalists have liked to cite witch-burning as a prime example of medieval ignorance and religious (usually Catholic) bigotry run amok. (Leftists today still denounce it as a cynical plot by the strong against the weak.) Writing history that way was simple: Historians catalogued horrors, disparaged religion (or at least someone else's religion), and celebrated the triumph of science and liberal government. The history of witchcraft seemed a settled issue in 1969 when Hugh Trevor-Roper published his classic essay, "The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries."



But a clamor of new voices has since reopened the controversy.

Members of the growing neopagan revival — 200,000 strong in America today — claim witches burned during the great witch-hunt as their martyred forebears. Last year, a consortium of pagan leaders demanded a special apology from Pope John Paul II on the Jubilee Day of Pardon. They mourned a "pagan Holocaust" of nine million secret nature-worshippers exterminated by Christians 500 years ago under the Inquisition.

Fifty years ago, one of the neopagan movement's founders, Gerald Gardner, coined the term "the Burning Times" to describe this time of persecution. Although Gardner's historical expertise has since been questioned, neo-pagan proponents Margot Adler and Starhawk (née Miriam Simos) are still preaching Gardner's teachings because, they say, "invented history is satisfying myth."

Nine million women burned is a figure conveniently larger than the Jewish Shoah, yet it was actually invented out of whole cloth by American feminist Matilda Joslyn Gage in 1893. Radical feminists have made much of this mass "gynocide," as antipornography activist Andrea Dworkin has called it. The feminists see witches as the natural enemy of patriarchy, rallying around them as Old Leftists did around the leaders of the Spanish Republic. For them, as for pagans, playing the politics of victimization strengthens solidarity.

Meanwhile, those of a Green stripe, a group that overlaps with the pagans and radical feminists, charge that suppressing witchcraft deprived medieval people of alternative medicine and estranged them from ancient Earth wisdom. In their 1973 book, *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers*, feminist and environmentalist writers Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English argued that witches were actually midwives targeted by their rivals, male physicians. Ecofeminist Carolyn Merchant has blamed

patriarchal science for "the death of Nature" in her book of that title.

Although the general public has yet to notice, recent academic research has largely demolished both the old Enlightenment certainties and the new neopagan theories. Archival studies conducted in different regions of Europe over the last few decades have more accurately measured who killed how many of whom under what circumstances. Using the tools of anthropology and psychology, historians have reconstructed the social context in which the witch-hunts happened. They have a clearer picture now of how witchcraft theories developed and on what intellectual bases.

A Multitude of Myths

For example, historians have now realized that witch-hunting was not primarily a medieval phenomenon. It peaked in the 17th century, during the rationalist age of Descartes, Newton, and St. Vincent de Paul. Persecuting suspected witches was not an elite plot against the poor; nor was practicing witchcraft a mode of peasant resistance. Catholics and Protestants hunted witches with comparable vigor. Church and state alike tried and executed them. It took more than pure Reason to end the witch craze.

Nor were witches secret pagans serving an ancient Triple Goddess and Horned God, as the neopagans claim. In fact, no witch was ever executed for worshiping a pagan deity. Matilda Gage's estimate of nine million women burned is more than 200 times the best current estimate of 30,000 to 50,000 killed during the 400 years from 1400 to 1800 — a large number but no Holocaust. And it wasn't all a burning time. Witches were hanged, strangled, and beheaded as well. Witch-hunting was not woman-hunting: At least 20 percent of all suspected witches were male. Midwives were not especially targeted; nor were witches liquidated as obstacles to professionalized medicine and mechanistic science.

This revised set of facts should not entirely comfort Catholics, however. Catholics have been misled — at times deliberately misled — about the Church's role in the witch-hunts by apologists eager to present the Church as innocent of witches' blood so as to refute the Enlightenment theory that witch-burning was almost entirely a Catholic phenomenon. Catholics should know that the thinking that set the great witch-hunt in motion was developed by Catholic clerics before the Reformation.

But the great witch-hunt was nonetheless remarkably slow in coming. Many cultures around the world believed for millennia — and still believe — in witches. In typical folklore, past and present, witches are night-flying evildoers who inflict harm on others by supernatural means, such as curses, the evil eye, and magic substances. Witchcraft is usually thought of as an innate power, unlike sorcery, whose magical spells must be learned. What Christianity uniquely added to those traditional beliefs was Satan. God's enemies were said to join Satan's band of demons through a pact and worship him at monstrous bacchanals called "sabbats," where they parodied the liturgy.

The Church inherited Roman and Germanic laws regarding maleficent magic, laws that treated witchcraft as a crime. But to St. Augustine, concrete witchcraft consisted of idolatry and illusion rather than harm to others. Following Augustine, an anonymous ninth-century text, *Canon Episcopi*, became part of the Church's canon law, declaring that belief in the reality of night-flying witches was heresy because there was no such thing as an actual witch. Although the idolatry and heresy associated with witchcraft resided only in the will, not in actual deeds, they were nevertheless sinful, Augustine wrote. Punishment was in order — but not burning.

The High Middle Ages of the twelfth and 13th centuries saw the bloody suppression of heretics, notably the Cathars in Provence. Measures against Jews, magicians, and sexual deviants also grew harsher.

These groups were associated with a stereotyped set of blasphemies, orgies, and outrages, including infanticide and cannibalism. Starting in 1232, the papal Inquisition dispatched roving specialists to detect and punish heretics outside existing legal systems.

Then, the idea that witchcraft was a reality rather than a heretical illusion suddenly made a comeback. The inquisitors who had cut their teeth on heretics were devouring accused witches as well by the end of the Middle Ages. This was not simply a matter of shifting scapegoats to suit market demand. In a society that feared supernatural menaces working through human conspiracies, the sinister folk figure of the esoterically schooled magician apparently fused with that of the petty village wise-woman or cunning man to create the new phenomenon of the diabolical witch.

After the first wisps of this change in the late 14th century, the flames burst forth around 1425 in the Savoy region, in what is now southeast France, and in the canton of Valais in Switzerland, near the borders of France and Italy. About 500 more witch trials followed before the Reformation began in 1517.

The Witch-Hunter's Baedeker

Meanwhile, witch-hunters' manuals multiplied, most notably the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum* (Hammer of Witches), published in 1486. Its authors, Jacob Sprenger and Heinrich Kraemer, were experienced Dominican inquisitors who had burned 48 witches in one diocese alone and had obtained a papal bull approving their mission. Reversing the old principle of the *Canon Episcopi*, Sprenger and Kraemer proclaimed that *not* believing in the reality of witches was heresy. Witches regularly did physical as well as spiritual harm to others, they wrote, and allegiance to the devil defined witchcraft. Sprenger and Kraemer exhorted secular authorities to fight witches by any means necessary.

Malleus Maleficarum (notice the feminine possessive of "witches") was a vicious misogynist tract. It depicted women as the sexual playmates of Satan, declaring: "All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable." Ironically, Sprenger also had a deep devotion to Mary. He helped to shape the modern rosary and founded the first rosary confraternity.

Malleus Maleficarum did not cover its ground completely, failing to discuss the actual pact that witches made with the devil, the sabbat, familiars (imps in animal form who aided witches), and night-flying. But those elements did not always appear in witchcraft cases. By itself, the *Malleus* started no new witch-panics, but it was freely used by later witchcraft writers, Protestant and Catholic alike. The Spanish inquisitors were nearly alone in scoffing at its lack of sophistication.

The demonologists who absorbed the *Malleus* were highly cultured men, such as the Protestant Jean Bodin, "the Aristotle of the 16th century," and his contemporary, the Jesuit classicist Martin del Rio. Those theoreticians pounded home the principle of the *crimen exceptum*: Because witchcraft was so vile an offense, accused witches had no legal rights. "Not one witch in a million would be accused or punished," Bodin boasted, "if the procedure were governed by ordinary rules." Anyone who defended accused witches or denied their crimes deserved the same punishment as witches, Bodin wrote.

Socially elite persecutors, demonologists, and judges relentlessly hunted witches with the zeal of modern revolutionaries pursuing a political utopia. No cost was too great, because witch-hunting served the greater good of Christendom, in their view. They believed that witchcraft inverted society's key values, disturbed godly order, challenged the divine right of kings — the ancient doctrine that rulers derive their right to rule from God — and diminished the majesty of God. It was thought that witch-hunting saved souls and averted the wrath of God by purging society of evil as the End Times loomed.

Commoners, by contrast, simply wanted relief from the evildoers of folklore who, they believed, were harming them, their children, their cattle, and their crops. It was grassroots complaints that started most witch-hunts. If authorities were too slow to act, peasants were capable of lynching suspected neighbors.

Although *maleficium* — physical harm — loomed much larger than diabolism in common people's accusations against suspected witches, their folk beliefs cross-fertilized the learned ones of Bodin and others in complex ways. Through sermons, gossip, trial accounts, and luridly illustrated "witch-books" (especially popular in Germany), everyone learned what witches did and how to detect them.

Witches Everywhere

The 30,000 to 50,000 casualties of the European witch-hunts were not distributed uniformly through time or space, even within particular jurisdictions. Three-quarters of Europe saw not a single trial. Witch persecution spread outward from its first center in alpine Italy in the early 15th century, guttering out in Poland, where witchcraft laws were finally repealed in 1788. The center had generally stopped trying witches before the peripheries even started.

The Spanish Road stretching from Italy to the Netherlands was also a "witch-road." The Catholic-ruled Spanish Netherlands (today's Belgium) saw far worse persecutions than the Protestant-ruled United Provinces of the Netherlands, which had stopped burning convicted witches by 1600. There were early panics in the German cities of Brandenburg and Mecklenburg, as well as in Lorraine, France, and parts of Switzerland and Scotland. The Rhineland and Southwest Germany suffered severe outbreaks, with German ecclesiastical territories hit hardest. Three-quarters of all witchcraft trials took place in the Catholic-ruled territories of the Holy Roman Empire. But Catholic Portugal, Castile and Spanish-ruled Italy, and the Orthodox lands of Eastern Europe saw virtually none. The panic in Salem, Massachusetts, was as bad as anything in England, but there seem to have been no executions in the Latin colonies of the New World.

The regional tolls demonstrated the patchwork pattern of witch-hunting. The town of Baden, Germany, for example, burned 200 witches from 1627 to 1630, more than all the convicted witches who perished in Sweden. The tiny town of Ellwangen, Germany, burned 393 witches from 1611 to 1618, more than Spain and Portugal combined ever executed. The Catholic prince-bishop of Würzburg, Germany, burned 600 witches from 1628 to 1631, more witches than ever died in Protestant Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Iceland combined. The Swiss canton of Vaud executed about 1,800 witches from 1611 to 1660, compared with Scotland's toll of between 1,300 and 1,500 and England's toll of 500. The claim of some Catholic apologists that Elizabeth I executed 800 witches a year is gross slander. In Southwest Germany alone, 3,229 people were executed for witchcraft between 1562 and 1684!—ash more than were executed for any reason by the Spanish, Portugese, and Roman Inquisitions between 1500 and 1800. (All three of these Inquisitions burned fewer than a dozen witches in total.)

The most-dreaded lay witch-hunter was Nicholas Rémy, attorney general of Lorraine, who boasted of sending 900 persons to the stake in a single decade (1581-1591). But the all-time grand champion exterminator of witches was Ferdinand von Wittelsbach, Catholic prince-archbishop of Cologne, Germany, who burned 2,000 members of his flock during the 1630s.

Let no one argue that witch-hunting was a predominantly Protestant activity. Both Catholic and Protestant lands saw light and heavy hunts. Demonologists and critics alike came from both religious camps.

Regional Influences

Local factors, not religious loyalties, determined the severity of witch persecutions. Roman law on the continent was harsher than English common law. Prosecuting *maleficium* alone, as England and Scandinavia did, yielded fewer victims than prosecuting diabolism (Scotland and Germany) or white magic (Lorraine and France). Unlimited torture in Germany induced more confessions than the limited torture in the Franche-Comté region in France. English third-degree methods such as sleep-deprivation were also effective ways of raising the number of convictions.

Ignoring denunciations procured through torture preserved Denmark from Germany's dreadful chain-reaction panics in which accused witches would in turn finger other witches. "Spectral evidence" from accusers' dreams was a significant prosecution device in Salem. Finding a witch's mark insensitive to pricking "or a witch's teat," on which familiars allegedly fed, secured convictions in Scotland and England; uncertainty about the credibility of witch's marks won acquittals in Geneva. Child witnesses — often malicious liars — proved deadly in Sweden, the Basque country in Spain, Germany, and England (the hysteria resembled that surrounding the sex-abuse charges brought against U.S. day-care centers during the 1980s).

Professional witch-finders had dire impact. The best-known of these freelance accusers was England's Matthew Hopkins, who doomed up to 200 people from 1645 through 1647. But special inquisitors or investigative committees were also lethal. Local judges were usually harsher than professional jurists from outside the community. Reviews of convictions by central authorities spared accused witches in Denmark, France, Sweden, and Austria. An informal appeal from ministers outside Salem halted the panic there.

Witch-hunting was typically part of broader campaigns to repress unruly behavior and impose religious orthodoxies. The hunt played out in a world of shrinking opportunities for ordinary folk. Early modern village economies were often zero-sum games, where the death of a cow could ruin a family. Peasants were locked into face-to-face contact with their neighbor-enemies. Feuds could last for generations.

The poorest and most marginalized people in communities were the most common targets of the witch-hunts, but sometimes social subordinates and even children turned the tables by accusing their wealthy superiors of witchcraft.

Women were more prominent than men at witchcraft trials, both as accused and as accusers. Not only did Sprenger's image of women as the more lustful and malicious sex generate suspicions; the fact that women had a lower social status than men made them easier to accuse. In most regions, about 80 percent of the alleged witches killed were female. Women were then as likely to be accused witches as men were to be saints or violent criminals. That was because women typically fought with curses instead of steel. Although the stereotype did not always fit, the British witch was usually seen as irascible, aggressive, unneighborly, and often repulsive — hardly the gentle healer of neopagan fantasy. Her colorful curses could blight everything down to "the little pig that lieth in the sty." She magnified her powers to frighten others and extort favors. If she could not be loved, she meant to be feared.

Alternatively, the witches of Lorraine were said to be "fine and crafty, careful not to quarrel with people or threaten them. Effusive compliments were signs of suspected witchcraft in Lorraine, and suppressed anger could be ominous. Being innocent of the impossible crimes associated with witchcraft did not necessarily mean that witch-hunt victims were "nice." Some were prostitutes, beggars, or petty criminals. Austria's Zauberpöckel trials (1675-1690) punished as witches people who were actually

dangerous felons. The Magic Jacket Society prosecuted in those trials was a Baroque version of the Hell's Angels, recruiting waifs whom it controlled through black magic, sodomy, and conjurations with mice. The prince-archbishop of Salzburg, Austria, graciously forbade executing members of the society who were under the age of twelve. But 200 others were put to death.

Panic and Torture

Witch-hunting could be endemic or epidemic. Its dynamics varied. Small panics (fewer than 20 victims) tended to occur in villages worried about *maleficium*. Their victims were often poor, obnoxious persons whose removal the rest of the community applauded.

If small panics fed on long-smoldering fears about neighbors, large ones exploded without warning, killing people of all classes and conditions and rupturing social bonds. The worst examples of this were in Germany, where unlimited use of torture (in defiance of imperial law) produced an ever-expanding wave of denunciations. To object was to court death.

Large witch-panics started with the usual obscure suspects and worked up the social scale to prosperous citizens, reputable matrons, high-ranking clerics, town officials, and even judges. The longer a panic lasted, the higher was the proportion of male and wealthy victims.

According to the Dutch Jesuit Cornelius van Loos, confiscations from suspected witches in large panics could "coin gold and silver from human blood." Youngsters were legally old enough to burn as soon as they could distinguish "gold from an apple." Children as young as nine were burned in Würzburg, including the bishop's nephew, and boys ages three and four were imprisoned as Satan's catamites.

Some of the German trials were marred by collusion, bribes, and rape. Unspeakable tortures were routine — 17 different kinds were authorized by "the Saxon lawgiver," Benedikt Carpzov, during the 17th century. Confessing "without torture" in Germany meant without torture that drew blood. Nearly all who underwent this broke, even the blameless.

Yet witches sometimes did turn themselves in and confess spontaneously, the equivalent of today's "suicide by police." The same melancholy, frustration, and despair that they claimed had driven them into the devil's arms brought them willingly to the stake. They had apparently come to believe the wish-fulfillment fantasies of pleasure and revenge enacted in the theaters of their minds. Nevertheless, they still hoped to save their souls through pain.

A few brave men spoke up for justice. In 1563, Johann Weyer, a Protestant court physician, drew attention to the cruelty of the trials and the mental incompetence of many of the accused. English country gentleman Reginald Scot mocked witchcraft as popish nonsense in 1584. In 1631, the Jesuit Friedrich von Spee, confessor to witches burned at Mainz, proclaimed them innocent victims. Van Loos, witness to the horrors of witchcraft trials at Trier, had his manuscript confiscated in 1592 before it could be published and was himself imprisoned and banished.

Ironically, a Spanish inquisitor named Alonso Salazar y Frias mounted the most dramatic challenge to witch-hunting. In 1609, a panic among French Basques in the western Pyrenees on the Bay of Biscay spilled over into the Navarra region in Spain, where six accused witches went to the stake. But Salazar, who had been a judge in that trial, became skeptical as the panic widened to engulf 1,800 suspects, 1,500 of them children. Basque witches' confessions included such incredible details as familiars in the form of costumed toads that child-witches herded with little crooks during sabbats.

Salazar cross-checked testimony, had supposed magic substances tested, and applied logic to conclude that the alleged witches were simply an artifact of witch-hunting. "There were neither witches nor bewitched until they were talked and written about," he reported in 1610. With stubborn patience, Salazar wrested a decision from his superiors that freed the accused in 1614. The Spanish Inquisition never executed another witch; nor did it permit secular authorities to do so after an outbreak in Catalonia that saw more than 300 witches hanged between 1616 and 1619. What could have erupted into Europe's worst witch-panic was extinguished by one man.

Cooling Ashes

Slowly, the critics were vindicated, and ashes cooled all across Europe during the 18th century. This was no simple triumph of Enlightenment wisdom. Witch beliefs persisted — as they do today — but witches no longer faced stakes, gallows, or swords. The great witch-panics had left a kind of psychic weariness in their wake. Realizing that innocents had been cruelly sent to their deaths, people no longer trusted their courts' judgments. As Montaigne had written 200 years earlier, "It is putting a very high price on one's conjectures to have a man roasted alive because of them."

After a 20th century unmatched for bloodshed, the world today is in no position to disparage early modern Europe. Witch-hunts have much in common with our own political purges, imagined conspiracies, and rumors of ritualized child abuse. Our capacity to project enormities on the enemy Other is as strong as ever.

The truth about witch-hunting is worth knowing for its own sake. But the issue has added significance for Catholics because it has provided ammunition for rationalists, pagans, and radical feminists to attack the Church. It is helpful to know that the number of victims has been grossly exaggerated, and that the reasons for the persecutions had as much to do with social factors as with religious ones.

But although Catholics have been fed comforting errors by overeager apologists about the Church's part in persecuting witches, we must face our own tragic past. Fellow Catholics, to whom we are forever bound in the communion of saints, did sin grievously against people accused of witchcraft. If our historical memory can be truly purified, then the smoke from the Burning Times can finally disperse.

Suggested Reading:

Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Harvard University Press, 1974).

Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (Viking, 1996). This is the best point of entry to modern scholarship on witchcraft.

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University Press, 1999).

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Sandra Miesel. "Who Burned the Witches?" *Crisis* 19, no. 9 (October 2001): 21-26.

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