Hexen: Wissen was stimmt (review)

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Abstract
In this slim volume, Rita Voltmer undertakes to survey historical European witchcraft. Unlike most other such surveys, which typically develop a basically chronological narrative that begins with the origins of various elements of witchcraft beliefs (harmful magic, diabolical pact, sabbath, etc.), follows these ideas through the years of major witch hunting (the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), and concludes with the decline of trials and eventual intellectual discrediting of much of the witch stereotype in the eighteenth century, she instead organizes her survey around a number of myths and misconceptions about historical witchcraft that have persisted in popular, and in many cases in scholarly, understanding in the modern era; that is, from the nineteenth century onward. The result is both engaging and useful.

Keywords
Europe, witches, witch trials, myth-busting, witch-marketing, witch-tourism, Neo-paganism

Disciplines
European History | History of Religion | Other History | Social History

Comments

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Michael D. Bailey

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http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mrw/summary/v006/6.1.bailey.html
but cannot entirely bridge. Despite Bailey’s interesting chapter, there is insufficient coverage of later medieval scholastic theology to track the antithesis between “reason” and “superstition,” which originated not in the Enlightenment but in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Catholicism fares very poorly in this collection. Alison Rowlands’s otherwise splendid chapter on the Lutheran superintendent Hartmann’s attack on Segenspruch in the late seventeenth century is ill equipped to see where the Lutheran got his ideas from; both this chapter and Alex Walsham’s impressively learned piece on England skirt around the genesis of Protestant arguments.

More significantly, one finds in this volume far more about the religious and intellectual responses to superstition than about superstition itself (assuming, as the authors generally do, that there is an “itself”). Most chapters rarely ask whether one can even begin to reconstruct a history of folk belief, distinct from the reactions of various branches of the intelligentsia to and, usually, against it. The amount of raw data about what “superstitious” people were (allegedly) thinking and doing appears very variable in this collection: sometimes it is very thin indeed. Serious incompatibilities about academic conventions of language appear between various chapters: some authors treat their material as an invitation to discuss or just allude to a great deal of theory, while others avoid it entirely. That divergence does not, however, as one might expect, simply separate the historians from the ethnographers and anthropologists. Finally, readers should be aware that some chapters address the issue of superstition only in a very slender tangential way (such as Bowd’s piece on witches in Brescia) while others, such as Geschiere, find the term still too loaded with value judgments to use at all.

These signs of discontinuity or unevenness emphatically do not detract from the usefulness of this serious and thoughtful collection. With increasing amounts of material becoming available to chart the history of “superstition” in an intellectually robust fashion, one may hope to see more courses on this subject entering academic curricula everywhere. There can be no doubt that this is exciting and challenging material to teach as well as to debate.

EUAN CAMERON
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In this slim volume, Rita Voltmer undertakes to survey historical European witchcraft. Unlike most other such surveys, which typically develop a basi-
cally chronological narrative that begins with the origins of various elements of witchcraft beliefs (harmful magic, diabolical pact, sabbath, etc.), follows these ideas through the years of major witch hunting (the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), and concludes with the decline of trials and eventual intellectual discrediting of much of the witch stereotype in the eighteenth century, she instead organizes her survey around a number of myths and misconceptions about historical witchcraft that have persisted in popular, and in many cases in scholarly, understanding in the modern era; that is, from the nineteenth century onward. The result is both engaging and useful.

In the course of debunking various myths and clarifying what was really true (“‘was stimmt’”) about historical witchcraft, Voltmer covers much of the same ground as more traditional surveys. She recounts the roots of various elements of the classic witch stereotype. She discusses the operations of a typical witch hunt, while of course noting that each region, and to some extent each trial, had its own norms and peculiarities. She estimates the total number of victims, exploding yet again, as other scholars have done before her, that most demonstrably fabricated but still persistent myth of nine million people executed as witches during the era of the major hunts. She addresses the economic and social characteristics of a typical victim, and of course addresses the gender question—why the great majority of those accused and executed for witchcraft were women. Approaching all these issues from the perspective of common misperceptions gives a freshness to her presentation of otherwise mainly standard points. As with any survey, one can quibble about what has necessarily been left out, or simplified, or streamlined. But the book is clear, well-informed, and engaging—exactly what one hopes for in a survey. I often found myself wishing, as I read, that the book were in English, so that I might use it with undergraduates—I can easily imagine its myth-busting approach holding great appeal for those students who are less than enthralled with straightforward chronological narrative. Certainly instructors could mine the text for useful strategies and examples.

There is, to my mind, one major element of this book that moves well beyond the realm of the standard survey and begins to examine some very interesting and altogether too little studied points. Voltmer, on occasion, enters into an exploration of when and why such persistent myths about historical witchcraft arose. Her conclusion is that they almost all stem from the nineteenth century, when enlightened “rationalists,” but also Romantic folklorists, began to construct the study of witchcraft as a historical field. From the Enlightenment side come such myths as the notion that the witch hunts were essentially a “medieval” phenomenon, when in fact, of course, the cumulative concept of diabolical, conspiratorial witchcraft only devel-
oped at the very end of the Middle Ages, and the major European hunts were entirely early modern. Tied to the “medieval” stereotype is the clerical stereotype—the notion that a monolithic “Church” was the main agent behind most witch trials, above all through the agency of its terrible “Inquisition.” As all experts know, trials in the major early modern hunts were typically conducted by secular courts, although naturally they were deeply influenced by religious ideals and morality. The great standing Inquisitions of the early modern period—the Spanish and Roman—were generally very conservative in handling cases of witchcraft, and were responsible for very few executions. Yet the need for Enlightenment thinkers to demonize “medieval” religion as superstitious, violent, and oppressive is evident, and witchcraft provided a very useful theme by which to do so.

Another major myth of the hunts is that they were driven from above by agents of a repressive and controlling state. Again, experts know that the larger and more developed states of early modern Europe generally conducted fewer witch trials. Like the major Inquisitions, their judicial systems were large, sophisticated, and perhaps above all staffed by educated professionals who were leery of much of the evidence and many of the mechanisms of witch trials, if not actually skeptical about witchcraft per se. Perhaps here it was the essentially Romantic need to see calculating officials of an impersonal state trying to impose uniformity and oppress individuality of spirit that led to the myth. As Voltmer stresses, in reality many witch hunts were generated “from below,” by “the people” themselves. Certainly the greatest witch myth stemming from the nineteenth century Romantic impulse is the notion, now embedded at the heart of modern Wicca and other forms of neopaganism, that historical witches were actually priestesses and priests of an ancient pagan cult that survived centuries of Christian persecution to preserve some semblance of an authentic, folkish culture and spirituality. The book offers a quick course in how such ideas actually developed.

Points such as these are not actually central to Voltmer’s survey. They are included simply to explain the myths that then get unpacked in the greater part of the book. Similarly her suggestion that these myths have mainly been perpetuated, since the nineteenth century, by “witch-marketing” and “witch-tourism” industries that have an interest in playing on simple, straightforward stereotypes, and now by mass media (the Harry Potter books, any number of films and television shows) is not a point of major analysis here. But it is certainly one worthy of serious and sustained investigation. Scholars of historical witchcraft, keenly aware of how much of their subject consists of conceptual constructions rather than demonstrable “realities,” have every reason to be equally interested in how the topic of witchcraft and
the figure of the historical witch has been constructed and reconstructed throughout the modern era.

MICHAEL D. BAILEY
Iowa State University


At first glance, Isobel Gowdie may not seem to have been at all unusual: a cottar’s wife from Auldearn, a township lying between Inverness and Eglin in the north of Scotland. For the most part, her life was likely to have been humdrum, save for two external circumstances that will have deeply affected her and her family and neighbors. One was the turbulence of war, which, on and off during the 1640s, had disturbed the whole area in which she lived; the other was a strict introverted version of Calvinism, which dominated Moray and Nairnshire and informed the spiritual and psychological lives of those in authority. Congregations in the kirk[s] of the region were perhaps not so sure of doctrine and the righteousness it was intended to promote. Ministers and lairds frequently complained about people’s lackluster faith, and noted with irritation their attachment to magic, belief in fairies, and the remnants of Catholic practice, all of which they tended to lump together under the general category of “superstition.” So when Isobel came before her local minister and ten other officials in April and May 1662 to be questioned about her alleged participation in and practice of witchcraft, her interrogators may have started by taking for granted that she was as weak in Calvinist devotion and as “superstitious” in much of her behavior as many or most of her neighbors. What they found to their astonishment and subsequent intrigued curiosity, however, was a highly articulate woman only too willing to give them detailed information about her occult life, and apparently not at all apologetic about it.

Those details are often extraordinary—enough to have caused her to be dismissed as demented by earlier scholars—and it is one of Wilby’s major tasks to banish such suggestions by studying Isobel in her several contexts. Thus, when Isobel talks of dining with the fairy king and queen, Wilby examines the Scottish traditions of fairy belief; and when Isobel describes how she once yoked a plough to frogs and then ploughed a field with them, Wilby discourses on Scottish oral performances of stories and legends, and