Hexen und Magie: Eine historische Einführung (review)

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Abstract
Historical research on witchcraft and magic is a burgeoning field, and one sign of the field's richness and success is the production of ever more sophisticated surveys and overviews. The European witch hunts have long enjoyed excellent historical surveys. The third edition of Brian Levack's The Witch Hunt in Early Modern Europe appeared in 2006 (reviewed in MRW 2 [2007]: 101–3), as did Richard Golden's massive project Encyclopedia of Witchcraft: The Western Tradition (reviewed in MRW 2 [2007]: 87–93). The six volumes of Bengt Ankarloo's and Stuart Clark's Witchcraft and Magic in Europe series appeared between 1999 and 2002 (see MRW 1 [2006]: 109–18). This project moved away from exclusive focus on the early modern witch hunts. While only one volume was devoted to The Period of the Witch Trials, the series as a whole stretched from Biblical and Pagan Societies to The Twentieth Century. Witchcraft remained at the conceptual heart of the project, however, with its underlying focus remained on harmful magic, and on the condemnation and demonization of magic culminating in the witch hunts. In 2007, Jonathan Barry's and Owen Davies's edited volume on Witchcraft Historiography moved away from surveying the history of witchcraft and focused on the contentious [End Page 215] historiography of the topic (see MRW 3 [2008]: 81–85). In my review of that book, I noted that the collection of essays was most welcome because "book-length historiographies are rare." It is yet another testament to the fertility of this field that I am so quickly proved wrong.

Disciplines
Cultural History | European History | History of Religion | Other History

Comments

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Published by University of Pennsylvania Press
DOI: 10.1353/mrw.0.0114

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http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mrw/summary/v003/3.2.bailey.html
porting Walter Stephens’s notion of learned witch beliefs as an inversion of the Eucharist or antisacrament.)

In short, this is a big, complicated book, full of wonderful detail and erudition. It is not a straightforward read, but, then again, its subject is neither simple nor unidimensional. Boudet makes a forceful point that one cannot begin to explain the early modern witch hunts without a thorough understanding of their medieval roots. He also does much—by tracing the divergence between astrology’s fate and that of divination and magic—to place the history of astrology within the wider context of the history of magic in medieval Europe. I have already urged this book upon several colleagues and graduate students, and I will keep my already well-thumbed copy close at hand for some time to come. When I first wanted to write about the history of astrology, I was told to learn Italian in order to read the scholarship in the field. Scholars who want to write about medieval astrology or magic now had better start by brushing up their French.

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Historical research on witchcraft and magic is a burgeoning field, and one sign of the field’s richness and success is the production of ever more sophisticated surveys and overviews. The European witch hunts have long enjoyed excellent historical surveys. The third edition of Brian Levack’s The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe appeared in 2006 (reviewed in MRW 2 [2007]: 101–3), as did Richard Golden’s massive project Encyclopedia of Witchcraft: The Western Tradition (reviewed in MRW 2 [2007]: 87–93). The six volumes of Bengt Ankarloo’s and Stuart Clark’s Witchcraft and Magic in Europe series appeared between 1999 and 2002 (see MRW 1 [2006]: 109–18). This project moved away from exclusive focus on the early modern witch hunts. While only one volume was devoted to The Period of the Witch Trials, the series as a whole stretched from Biblical and Pagan Societies to The Twentieth Century. Witchcraft remained at the conceptual heart of the project, however, with its underlying focus remained on harmful magic, and on the condemnation and demonization of magic culminating in the witch hunts. In 2007, Jonathan Barry’s and Owen Davies’s edited volume on Witchcraft Historiography moved away from surveying the history of witchcraft and focused on the contentious
historiography of the topic (see MRW 3 [2008]: 81–85). In my review of that book, I noted that the collection of essays was most welcome because “book-length historiographies are rare.” It is yet another testament to the fertility of this field that I am so quickly proved wrong.

In this excellent and insightful overview, Johannes Dillinger aims to provide a historical introduction to “witches and magic.” The placement of the terms in the title is important. The main focus of this book is witchcraft, and specifically the witchcraft of the the major period of European witch trials from the late fifteenth through seventeenth centuries. Yet Dillinger rightly notes that the larger context for the history of witchcraft is the history of magic. Rather than a chronological, historical survey, this is a thematic, historiographical one. Dillinger begins (in Chapter 2, after a brief first chapter that is an introduction) with definitions, both historical and modern, of magic and witchcraft. He examines how one of the essential modern definitions of magic, contrasting it with religion, is extremely problematic and largely inapplicable in a premodern, historical context. Theories of magic advanced by Frazer, Malinowski, Durkheim, Mauss, and others are discussed and wisely dispensed with. The historically slippery notion of superstition also comes under consideration. Turning to witchcraft, he notes that while this term can carry quite general meanings of harmful magic, it can also be used much more narrowly to mean only the particular matrix of magical and demonological beliefs that defined the crime during the period of the early modern witch hunts. Throughout, the handling of the often murky meanings of magic and witchcraft is clear and wellgrounded.

Following discussion of definitions, Dillinger turns to the beliefs and practices that comprised magic, as well as related beliefs in spirits and demons. He briefly touches on the quasi-scientific category of natural magic, but as this form of magic had little relation to witchcraft he quickly moves on to his first major focus on folk magic. This was the common magic of everyday life in premodern Europe that underlay many of the supposed operations of witchcraft. An enormous amount of attention has concentrated on trying to determine the origins of such magic—was it the residue of pre-Christian, pagan rites or belief-systems; did it change or develop over time? Dillinger effectively dispenses with the whole issue, noting that the latest research tends to focus more on how such magic was believed to function and the ends to which it was put, rather than wasting energy speculating on its dim origins. Moving from magic to beliefs in spirits, Dillinger begins here with common beliefs in fairies, vampires, and other entities that tend to hover around the edges of historical witchcraft, and then moves into the more or less learned demonology that comprised an essential prop to the stereotype of demonic
witchcraft. He is careful to note, however, the conclusions of the most recent research that there was never an absolutely coherent demonological consensus among European elites, and that demonologists drew from common belief-structures as often as they helped to shape them.

Coming to the period of the major witch trials themselves, Dillinger notes that there is now no scholarly consensus about their origins, beyond the basic fact that the causes of the dramatic upturn in legal prosecution of witchcraft were almost certainly multiple. He expertly unpacks several grand explanations—Muchembled’s acculturation thesis, for example, and Behringer’s (and others’) arguments about the effects of agrarian crisis and a “little ice age,” noting their strengths and limitations. He also provides very clear treatment of how the energies that could drive a witch trial might come from above, instigated by authorities determined to eradicate a perceived demonic threat, but very often derived from below, emerging out of village dynamics and social strife.

Regarding the question of who might be suspected or accused of witchcraft, he easily dispenses with outdated theories that there really were witchcults—either genuine demonic cults such as Montague Summers once maintained, or the remnants of pre-Christian religions, as Margaret Murray asserted. He notes, however, that there might well have been “real witches,” in the sense that accusations took place in a society steeped in magical beliefs and in which many people really did try to practice magic. While the most common type of village magicians—healers and cunning folk—were generally not confused by their neighbors with harmful witches, some victims of trials certainly did confess to practicing harmful magic (though typically not to membership in demonic cults) without any coercion being applied by authorities, implying that at least a few people accused of being witches in fact identified themselves as such. Again, however, most accusations, and the sort of person being accused, can be explained in terms of various kinds of social strife. Dillinger affords the greatest space to the gendering of witchcraft, clearly and coherently unpacking the enormous number of arguments and theories that have grown up around the fact that, on average across Europe, accused witches were far more likely to be women than men. Considering the enormous number of variables in play, and stark regional differences, Dillinger concludes that the best analysis remains that of Christina Larner: that witchcraft was “sex-related, not sex-specific.”

The final chapters of the book deal with the end of major legally sanctioned witch-hunting across Europe, and the endurance of magic and witchcraft after this period. Dillinger is a sure guide through the thicket of early witchcraft skeptics to eventually decriminalization. His general conclusion,
in line with most recent scholarship, is that the Enlightenment provided the major intellectual blow against the whole system of magical beliefs that supported the idea of witchcraft, but that the Enlightenment itself was never so fully disenchanted as its adherents sometimes made it out to be. He also offers a brief overview of the forms in which magic and witchcraft have survived into the modern era. Many common magical practices endured past the end of authorities’ and governments’ rejections of magical beliefs, as did some popular justice and lynching of suspected sorcerers. In certain parts of Africa and other regions of the world, where Western colonialism had imposed a ban on the prosecution of witchcraft, laws and legal witch hunts are actually being reconstituted in the postcolonial era. In the modern West, however, magic and witchcraft most often survive either as deliberate recreations, such as Wicca, or as cultural symbols.

In his final two chapters, Dillinger to some degree turns away from historiography to straight history. This is appropriate and necessary—though important work is starting to be done on magic and witchcraft after the age of the witch hunts, there are fewer developed theories and clear lines of analysis with which one can engage. In his conclusion Dillinger identifies modern magic as one important area of future research, as well as more focus on political factors underlying concerns over witchcraft in the era of the major hunts, and careful study of the individuals involved in these trials, rather than just the broad social forces that helped to shape them. His own expert survey of where the historiography of witchcraft has been, and where it is going, offers a useful basis from which future scholars can work.

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Michael Mangan’s Performing Dark Arts is a lively study of “the way in which the meanings of magic change in relation to the society in which the magic is produced” (p. 172). With the word “conjuring,” Mangan refers to theatrical magic, of the sort that most Americans associate with David Copperfield and Harry Houdini. A skillful blend of magic history and theoretical performance analysis unifies Performing Dark Arts. Mangan exhibits a keen ability to discuss the relationship between “magic as entertainment” and “magic as [spiritual] efficacy” throughout the time periods he explores.