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Johannes Nider

Michael D. Bailey
Iowa State University, mdbailey@iastate.edu

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Johannes Nider

Abstract
A Dominican theologian and religious reformer active in the early fifteenth century, Nider wrote some of the most extensive and influential early accounts of witchcraft. His major work on this subject, Formicarius (The Anthill), written in 1437 and 1438, was printed in seven separate editions between 1475 and 1692. It was also an important source of information for the infamous Malleus Maleficarum (The Hammer of Witches), written by the Dominican Heinrich Kramer and first published in 1486. The fifth book of the Formicarius, which dealt specifically with "witches and their deceptions" ("de maleficiis et eorum deceptionibus"), was included in several later editions along with the Malleus. In addition to relating numerous stories of witchcraft in the Formicarius, Nider treated the topics of magic and sorcery in two other works, De lepra morali (On Moral Leprosy) and Preceptorium divine legis (Preceptor of Divine Law). Born in the small Swabian imperial

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Comments
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At the dramatic climax, the propaganda message was delivered. The witch’s last words were reported to be: “And is it come to pass, that I must die indeed? Why then, his excellency the earl of Essex shall be fortunate and win the field’ (A Most Certain, Strange, and true Discovery of a Witch, 7). The defeat of a royalist witch was thus made into a prophecy of parliamentary superiority and provided proof that the Devil was on the king’s side. The story of the witch of Newbury therefore revealed itself to have been a powerfully instructive fantasy or allegory, albeit one with little, if any, foundation in fact.

MALCOLM J. GASKILL

See also: ANTICHRIST; ENGLAND; HOPKINS, MATTHEW; PAMPHLETS AND NEWSPAPERS; WARFARE.

References and further reading:

NIDER, JOHANNES (CA. 1380–1438)
A Dominican theologian and religious reformer active in the early fifteenth century, Nider wrote some of the most extensive and influential early accounts of witchcraft. His major work on this subject, Formicarius (The Anthill), written in 1437 and 1438, was printed in seven separate editions between 1475 and 1692. It was also an important source of information for the infamous Malleus Maleficarum (The Hammer of Witches), written by the Dominican Heinrich Kramer and first published in 1486. The fifth book of the Formicarius, which dealt specifically with “witches and their deceptions” (“de maleficis et eorum deceptionibus”), was included in several later editions along with the Malleus. In addition to relating numerous stories of witchcraft in the Formicarius, Nider treated the topics of magic and sorcery in two other works, De lepra moralis (On Moral Leprosy) and Preceptorium divine legis (Preceptor of Divine Law).

Born in the small Swabian imperial city of Isny in the early 1380s, Nider entered the Dominican Order at Colmar in 1402. At this time, Colmar (now in Alsace, France) was one of only two Dominican houses in German lands controlled by the so-called observant, or reform, movement. We can assume that Nider chose to enter the order at Colmar because he was attracted to the observant movement; he eventually became one of the most important observant Dominican leaders of his day. Following the normal course of Dominican education, Nider underwent his initial training at Colmar, then learned the liberal arts at a Dominican studium generale (house of studies; literally “general studies”), and finally received his theological education. He began studying theology in Cologne, possibly as early as 1410, but left before completing his degree and attended some sessions of the Council of Constance (1414–1418). In 1422, he petitioned to be admitted to study theology in Vienna, where he received his degree in June 1425.

Nider taught briefly at Vienna and then served as prior of the Dominicans in Nuremberg from 1426 or 1427 until April 1429, when he moved to Basel to undertake the reform of the Dominican priory there. While in Basel, he not only served as prior of the Dominicans but also became a leading member of the Council of Basel (1431–1449). He delivered the opening sermon of the council, served on its deputation for religious reform, and undertook several important missions to negotiate with the heretical Hussites in Bohemia. Moreover, under his leadership, several of the council’s most important deputations and delegations met in his Dominican priory. In late 1434 or early 1435, however, Nider left Basel, returning to Vienna to teach theology. He was elected dean of the theological faculty in 1436. In 1438, he returned briefly to Basel, continuing on that summer to direct the reform of the
female Dominican convent of St. Catherine in Colmar. Upon his return journey, he died at Nuremberg on August 13, 1438.

Although an active intellectual figure for slightly over ten years, from 1426 until 1438, and although frequently occupied during this period with numerous other duties, Nider was nevertheless a prolific author who wrote at least fifteen major treatises, as well as numerous sermons and letters. His topics ranged from the reform of the religious orders to heresy, as well as general moral guidance and treatises on the care of souls. Yet he is mainly known as an authority on witchcraft, above all for his most important work, Formicarius. This long treatise was composed in the form of a dialogue between a theologian, who was clearly Nider himself, and a lazy but curious student who posed questions on a wide range of moral and spiritual matters. The treatise took its title and its organizing symbol from Proverbs 6.6 (which also served as its opening line): “Go to the ant, O lazy one, and consider its ways and learn wisdom.” Throughout, the character of the student (the “lazy one” of the Proverbs) posed questions and demanded not just scholastic reasoning but also present-day examples to illustrate the theologian’s points. Thus the dialogue of the Formicarius often became a collection of morally edifying stories probably intended for use in sermons.

Because of this format, when Nider turned to the topic of witchcraft, he presented not just a purely theoretical, scholastic account of the powers of demons and the workings of sorcery but actual stories of witches and witchcraft that he had heard from other authorities (he never seemed to have actually encountered a witch himself). Many of these stories were set in various locations in the western Alps, mostly the territory of Bern in the diocese of Lausanne, where some of the earliest true witchcraft trials were beginning to take place at this time. Many of Nider’s stories of witchcraft came from a single source, the secular judge Peter of Bern, who had conducted numerous sorcery or witchcraft trials several years earlier in the Simme valley of the Bernese Oberland. Nider supplemented these accounts with information from a Dominican inquisitor of Autun who was active against witches, with personal discussions he had in Vienna with a former demonic magician or necromancer who had since reformed and now lived as a pious Benedictine monk, and with the account of certain delegates to the Council of Basel about the burning of Joan of Arc and several other women whom Nider regarded as witches.

The picture of witchcraft that emerged in the Formicarius contained most of the elements that became standard parts of the witch stereotype throughout the centuries of the great witch hunts in Europe. Nider described witches mostly as simple rustics who performed harmful sorcery of various sorts—causing infertility or illness in people or animals, killing small children, damaging or destroying crops, or magically stealing crops from their neighbors’ fields. Witches performed this magic through the agency of demons, and the witches gained their power over demons by formally renouncing their faith and worshipping the Devil at secret nocturnal gatherings. At these ceremonies they also desecrated the cross and the sacraments, cannibalized the bodies of young children and babies, engaged in sexual orgies, and performed various other detestable acts. Notably, Nider’s witches did not fly to these gatherings; night flight was never mentioned in the Formicarius except as a delusion.

Although in the course of his stories, Nider described both male and female witches, and although he consistently used male pronouns when referring to witches in general, he is nevertheless the first major clerical authority to argue that women were more prone to witchcraft than men. Immediately after the discussion of Joan of Arc in the Formicarius, the lazy student expressed amazement that the weaker sex could be capable of such terrible crimes. Through the voice of the theologian, Nider responded that, shocking as it seems, learned authorities knew that it was not rare for women to wield such demonic power. He then explained how women were more prone to the temptations of the Devil, due mainly to their weaker physical, mental, and moral nature, and produced several biblical, patristic, and classical citations to this effect. Thus, women were more easily seduced into the crime of witchcraft than men. This section of the Formicarius served as a basis for the even more extreme misogyny of the later Malleus Maleficarum.

Interestingly, alongside tales of nocturnal conventicles and diabolic cults of witches, Nider also presented several accounts that lacked these more extreme flourishes. Most of these stories centered on the figure of a single “great witch,” a man named Staedelin, of whom Nider heard from Peter of Bern. Although called a witch (maleficus), Staedelin was not presented as a member of any cult, and although his magic was demonic in nature, he does not appear to have surrendered his soul to the Devil or to have apostatized. Rather, these stories seemed much more “realistic” and probably more accurately depicted certain common magical practices and beliefs that existed before the emergence of the full stereotype of witchcraft. The Formicarius, therefore, seemed to represent almost the exact moment when the more developed stereotype of diabolic witchcraft superceded earlier ideas of simple demonic sorcery, at least in the minds of some clerical authorities.

Nider also discussed magic and witchcraft in sections of his moral treatises De lepra morali and Preceptorum divini legis. Lacking the narrative quality of the Formicarius, these treatises generally presented a
more purely theoretical account of the supposed workings of demonic magic, particularly of the various powers and natural abilities of demons, and of the necessity and workings of the pacts that supposedly bound demons to the human sorcerers or witches who commanded them.

MICHAEL D. BAILEY

See also: BASEL, COUNCIL OF; DOMINICAN ORDER; FEMALE WITCHES; FLIGHT OF WITCHES; HUSSES; JOAN OF ARC; KRAMER, HEINRICH; LAUSANNE, DIOCESE OF; MALLEUS MALEFICARUM; ORIGINS OF THE WITCH HUNTS; PETER OF BERN; SABBAT.

References and further reading:

NIGHT WITCH, OR NIGHT HAG

A witch believed to wander in the night is called a night witch or night hag.

The origins of the night witch can be traced back to ancient times, in Hebrew belief, for example, the female demon Lilith was associated with the night and its denizens. Lilith, the baby-snatching demon whose presence was a constant threat to mothers and their newborns, subsequently became a powerful force in early modern European demonology; her various powers included the ability to steal semen from sleeping men. In Roman literature of the imperial era, the image of the witch who worked her evil at night was prevalent. In the Satyricon (§ 63), Petronius (d. C.E. 65) described the work of the strigae (witches; etymologically connected with strix, or screech owl), whom he later called nocturnae (literally, “women of the night”). These night witches were described as having worked magic on a youth (replacing his innards with straw) and also causing insanity and later death to a valiant man who attempted to drive them away. The connotations of the night have contributed significantly to the belief in and depiction of the night witch, for it is at night that "life is considered to be in a state of suspended animation, a necessary lull during the hours of the dominion of death” (Caro Baroja 1964, 5).

In Greece and Rome, ghosts and certain deities associated with witchcraft, such as Hecate, were thought to haunt crossroads and similar frightening places at night. Such beliefs remained and were altered and elaborated upon throughout the centuries. In the Basque region, for example, there are various stories about the nocturnal activities of witches, including ones not necessarily relating to evil acts, such as horseback rides in the dark hours. The witch’s association with cats (in addition to owls and wolves) was partially based on the belief that witches, like cats, were particularly active at night. The conviction that witches could transform themselves into cats gave rise to various stories (and court cases) involving maleficium (harmful magic) directed against infants and children, as well as other random acts of evil. In 1608, Francesco Maria Guazzo, citing Nicolas Rémy, commented: “Remy (Il. 5) writes nearly all those who came into his hands charged with witchcraft told him that they changed themselves into cats whenever they wished to enter other people’s houses in secret, so that they could scatter their poison there by night” (Compendium Maleficarum [A Summary of Witches] 1.8).

The idea of the witch who transformed herself at night predated the early modern European age, as evidenced in the poem by Propertius (ca. 50–ca. 16 B.C.E.) in which he described the activities of a witch who “can change her form into that of a night-prowling wolf” (4.5.14). Similarly, Ovid (43 B.C.E. – C.E. 17) described the witch Dipsas, whom he suspected of performing shape-shifting magic to transform herself into a nocturnal bird (Amores 1.8.13–14). In the Fasti (6.131–146), Ovid described owl-like birds, which he suggested were old women transformed, who traveled at night in search of unprotected babies to devour. Norman Cohn (1993, 64) noted the existence of similar beliefs among the Germanic peoples prior to Roman and, later, Christian influences. During the Early Middle Ages, belief in the strigae continued throughout Germany, and the images that characterized their descriptions in Latin literature, namely, metamorphosis and cannibalism, were reflected in indigenous Germanic folktales. Those gripped by nightmares or suffering from night paralyses could also find an explanation in the presence and effects of the night witch. Sensations of heaviness, suffocation, and general discomfort were once ascribed to the night witch sitting on a person’s chest (hence the term night hag or old hag syndrome).

The definitive expression of the activities of the night witch was, arguably, participation in the Sabbat, the gathering of witches in remote places that invariably took place at night. Again the motif of metamorphosis was prominent in the conceptualization of the Sabbat,

828 NIGHT WITCH, OR NIGHT HAG