

2015

Witch/Witchcraft and Sorcerer/Sorcery

Michael D. Bailey

Iowa State University, mdbailey@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/history_pubs

 Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [European History Commons](#), [History of Science, Technology, and Medicine Commons](#), and the [Medieval History Commons](#)

The complete bibliographic information for this item can be found at http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/history_pubs/85. For information on how to cite this item, please visit <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/howtocite.html>.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Publications by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.

Witch/Witchcraft and Sorcerer/Sorcery

Abstract

The academic study of religion has been an interdisciplinary endeavor since its inception at the end of the nineteenth century. Much of the theoretical vocabulary that is needed to study religion has been imported from adjacent disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, historiography, theology, philology, literary studies, psychology, philosophy, cultural studies, and political sciences. It is the strength of the academic study of religion to bring these approaches into conversation with one another. The *Vocabulary for the Study of Religion* provides an excellent platform to sustain this conversation. Written by experts with a background in a variety of disciplines, over 400 entries collected in the *Vocabulary* offer a unique overview of critical terms in the study of religion(s), as well as the themes and issues that have to be addressed in future research. This is the first dictionary in English that covers such a broad spectrum of theoretical topics. The *Vocabulary* is an indispensable tool for all students of religion and it will influence the academic discussion for many years.

Disciplines

Cultural History | European History | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Medieval History

Comments

This book chapter is published as “Witch/Witchcraft and Sorcerer/Sorcery,” in *Vocabulary for the Study of Religion*, ed. Robert A. Segal and Koku von Stuckrad, 3 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 3: 608-13. Posted with permission.

Witch/Witchcraft and Sorcerer/Sorcery

In most contexts, witchcraft and sorcery generally designate harmful magic performed with evil intent. The practitioners of such magic have often been regarded as being in league with evil spirits or demons, and in medieval and early modern Europe Christian authorities regarded them as demon-worshippers and servants of the devil. The English word “witch” (*wycche/wiche*) emerged in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, deriving from the Old English *wicce*. The word “sorcery” appeared at roughly the same time, derived from the Old French *sorterie* and the late Latin *sorteria*, itself derived from *sortilegium*, which originally meant casting lots (*sortes*) as a means of divination, but which eventually became a broader term designating active divinatory or magical practices. Similar terms appeared in most European vernaculars at around this same time: the German *Hexe/Hexerei*, Italian *strega/stregoneria* (derived from the Latin *strix*, meaning screech-owl but also designating a kind of nocturnal vampiric monster believed to prey on the blood of infants, as witches were sometimes thought to do), and Spanish *bruja/brujería*. The most common Latin word for the harmful magic entailed in witchcraft/sorcery was *maleficium*, and a practitioner was designated *maleficus* (feminine: *malefica*).

The magic entailed by any of these terms usually consisted of simple spells or curses (as opposed to more complex systems of elite ritual magic) intended to cause illness or injury, to impede sexual fertility, to wither crops and damage fields, and sometimes to perform theft or divination. Practices of witchcraft could also involve the use of herbs, potions, or other natural materials. Practitioners were mostly thought to be uneducated and poor, often social outcasts of some kind, and in most cases were thought to be more often women than men, a fact still evident in the

gendered connotations of the modern English “witch” and “witchcraft,” although less so for “sorcery.” Of course, basic concepts of harmful magic and the wicked people who used it existed long before medieval Christian society or even Latin antiquity, and the connotations attached to such magic and its supposed practitioners varied over time.

Western Antiquity and the European Middle Ages

Belief in evil figures who could be called witches and in harmful practices that could be called witchcraft are evident in the very earliest Western cultures. Multiple texts have survived of an ancient Babylonian ceremony known as *Maqlû* (literally, “burning”) that was directed against witches and the harm they sought to inflict. The text contains scant information about the identity of these malefactors, but they seem to have been regarded mainly as female, being designated most often by the feminine form of the word *kaššaptu*, typically translated as “witch.” This term also appears in the famous Code of Hammurabi, dating to the early 1700s B.C.E., and it is a cognate of the Hebrew term *kešeph*, used in an injunction against witches/sorcerers in Deuteronomy 18:10, composed perhaps in the seventh century B.C.E.

The classical Greek word most often translated as “witchcraft” is *goētia*, and its practitioners were *goētes*. These terms appear to have derived from ritual laments associated with funerary practices and so came to designate the performance of spells, incantations, and forms of divination that called upon the dead or were employed in other sinister ways. Another common term, *pharmakeia*, referred to the preparation of drugs and potions, and could readily connote sorcery or witchcraft, especially in the sense of preparation of poisons but also in terms of drugs

meant to instigate abortions or otherwise affect sexual fertility, or even love potions more generally. Greek literature also gave Western culture many of its enduring images of sorceresses and witches, such as Circe, who transformed Odysseus and his men into swine with the help of certain drugs (*pharmaka*), and Medea, who used potions, poisons, and incantations first to aid her husband Jason and his Argonauts, and then to exact revenge when he abandoned her.

As the Romans appropriated Greek culture, they developed a Latin terminology for many of these basic ideas that became standard in European culture for centuries. The use of harmful drugs and poisons was, for them, the crime of *veneficium*, and this remained a term for witchcraft into the Christian middle ages. As already noted, the word *sortilegium* and its multiple later variants, such as *sortiaria* and *sorceria*, derived from casting lots but became broader terms for divination and ultimately sorcery, and *maleficium* became a general designation for harmful magic and therefore witchcraft. Roman literature also included many depictions of witches, perhaps the most terrible being Erichtho, who appears in Lucan's epic *Pharsalia* about the civil war between Caesar and Pompey. On the eve of the decisive battle, Pompey's son Sextus seeks her out to perform a divination, which she does by horrifically reviving the corpse of a dead soldier.

Another enduring and influential image of a "witch" from antiquity was the woman whom the Hebrew king Saul consulted in Endor before a major battle against the Philistines (1 Samuel 28). The Hebrew text describes her as a "mistress of an *ob*," which designated a medium who consulted with spirits. At Saul's request, the woman summoned the spirit of the dead prophet Samuel, and there is nothing in the text to indicate that her powers were malevolent in any way.

Nevertheless, subsequent Christian interpretation of this passage settled on the idea that she had actually conjured a demon that only masqueraded as Samuel, and so she was a witch in service to the devil.

As Christianity became dominant in the late Roman world, practitioners of *maleficium*, *veneficium*, and the like were increasingly cast as being in league with evil demons and thus in opposition to the Christian god. In the Latin West, Augustine of Hippo (354-430 C.E.) was the most important church father to formulate the idea that not just *maleficium* but almost any form of magic or divination drew on demonic power and indicated some kind of demonic pact binding the human practitioner to the forces of hell. This increasingly diabolical tint did not necessarily render witchcraft or sorcery more terrible than they had been perceived to be in the ancient world, however. Christian doctrine firmly subjugated demons, and thus the power of witches, to the overriding justice of God. Many early Christian authorities maintained that demons, terrible though they were, operated mainly by means of trickery and illusion. Early medieval law codes generally punished witchcraft and sorcery only to the extent that they were believed to cause real harm, not because of the inherent religious infraction of associating with demons.

Many sources also presented sorcerers and witches as the victims or dupes of demons. Canon law codes and penitentials often prescribed relatively mild penances (compared to the harsh penalties of later centuries) for engaging in supposedly demonic practices, and in many cases the practices themselves were dismissed as ineffective or illusory and penance was imposed for believing in their power or reality. For example, the famous canon *Episcopi*, composed probably in the late ninth century and which would centuries later provide a basis for the idea of witches'

night-flight to a sabbath, declared that women who thought they traveled at night in the train of the goddess Diana had been “seduced by the illusions and phantasms of demons” (Kors and Peters 2001, 62) and that their journeys were entirely unreal. By the end of the middle ages and into the early modern period, however, Christian authorities came to consider demonic sorcery a much more serious and threatening practice, and they began to treat witchcraft as a much more serious crime.

The Era of the Witch Hunts

A major development in Western European conceptions of sorcery and witchcraft occurred in the early fifteenth century. An elaborate stereotype that many scholars refer to as diabolical, conspiratorial witchcraft began to appear, evident in trials and described in a number of demonological texts. This notion posited that witches were not merely individual evildoers who worked harmful demonic sorcery against their neighbors because of personal animosity, greed, or other wicked intent, but rather that they were members of organized diabolical cults. Witches might now be imagined as gathering in groups to worship demons, engage in sexual orgies, desecrate the eucharist, trample on crosses, and murder and cannibalize young children. At the direction of their demonic masters, they seduced new members into their sects, who would be required to renounce their faith before being instructed in the rites of witchcraft. Witches in this sense posed a collective threat to all of Christian society. Importantly for the larger-scale witch hunts that were beginning to develop, the idea of witches operating as a sect meant that authorities could expect any suspected witch to identify others, and would frequently seek to

coerce them into doing so by torture. Thus a single accusation could trigger a chain-reaction of trials, and this became one of the basic mechanisms by which large witch hunts developed.

Many aspects of the diabolical, conspiratorial stereotypes of witchcraft were rooted in earlier medieval conceptions about heretical groups, also often imagined to operate in diabolically organized sects. Anti-Jewish stereotypes also supplied some elements. Christian authorities in the middle ages often imagined that Jews gathered in secret to desecrate Christian sacraments and murder Christian babies. While gatherings of witches would eventually come to be called sabbaths, in the earliest texts they are labeled “synagogues.” For a stereotype that came to have widespread acceptance, the earliest descriptions of diabolical, conspiratorial witchcraft were remarkably localized. They appeared within roughly the decade of the 1430s, in a cluster of texts all written in lands around the western Alps (Ostorero et al. 1999), where trials were also coming to reflect this notion of witchcraft. By the end of the century, witch-hunting manuals such as the infamous *Malleus maleficarum* (1486) were helping to spread these ideas across Europe.

While many aspects of diabolical, conspiratorial witchcraft came to be widely accepted, at least by witch-hunting authorities, much recent scholarship has stressed that understandings of witchcraft were never uniform. While the originally Alpine stereotype of synagogues and sabbaths spread in northern Europe, in Mediterranean lands ideas of witchcraft followed a somewhat different pattern, heavily influenced by notions of vampiric *streghe* who would suck children’s blood at night (Kieckhefer 2006). Although major hunts in many regions appear to have been driven in part by ideas of the collective, conspiratorial threat witches were believed to present, many individual trials or more limited series of trials focused primarily on the harmful

actions witches were believed to have performed, with diabolical notions and the imagery of the sabbath either entirely absent or playing only a minimal role. While major hunts claiming scores, hundreds, or even thousands of victims have long been a focus of witchcraft scholarship, experts now point to the need to refocus attention on more contained trials and to regard these, rather than a few spectacular conflagrations, as normative (Midelfort 2011).

From the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, witch-hunting varied widely in intensity across Europe. The most severe hunts occurred within the Holy Roman Empire, which was also where more than half of all known legal executions for witchcraft took place. Yet the empire was extremely fragmented in this period, and some territories saw very little witch-hunting. Across the rest of Europe, major hunts sometimes occurred, but most trials involved only a handful of suspects. These can more easily be understood as part of the regular operation of (typically harsh) early modern justice. All told, there were probably under 100,000 witch trials conducted in Europe in the early modern period, and likely under 50,000 executions (Levack 2006, 23). General conviction and execution rates seem to have been about 50 percent for those brought to trial, although in some jurisdictions they were much lower and in others they could skyrocket above 90 percent. About 75 percent of convicted witches were women, although again in some regions nearly all witches were women while in others the majority could be men. An entirely uniform conception of who witches might be or what they might do never existed.

Given the variable nature of witch trials across Europe, and to some extent of conceptions of witchcraft itself, it is difficult to posit reasons for the increased severity of concern about witchcraft in the early modern period. Religious reform and subsequent confessional strife have

long been thought to have played an important role. Protestants and Catholics for the most part held similar notions of what witchcraft entailed and were equally capable of conducting witch trials. For all the major confessions, the argument runs, concerns to maintain proper morality and religious purity within their own groups generated tensions that were expressed in anxiety about witches. Some scholars have also pointed to climate change and the social deprivations it could cause, noting that Europe underwent a “little ice age” in this period. Others note particular concerns about fertility, familial nurturing, and social stability, and such factors may have particularly influenced the gendered nature of witchcraft. The willingness of courts across Europe to treat witchcraft as a very serious and in many cases an “exceptional crime” (*crimen exceptum*), allowing for the admission of more questionable kinds of evidence and the freer use of torture to extract confessions, certainly contributed to an increased number of trials.

Legal restrictions also appear to have been essential to the eventual decline of witch-hunting. Witch trials flourished best in regions of relatively local judicial control. Larger, more bureaucratic central courts appear almost always to have been more skeptical of witchcraft accusations, if not of the underlying reality of witchcraft itself. Despite its sinister reputation in history, for example, the Spanish Inquisition was very restrained in conducting witch trials, executing perhaps only two dozen people for this crime after 1526, and none after 1610 (Monter 2002, 46-47). The Parlement of Paris, the central appeals court for most of northern France, stopped executing witches after 1625. By the late seventeenth century, many jurisdictions had followed suit.

Modern Conceptions and Global Contexts

Widespread belief in witchcraft continued in Europe long after the number of witch trials began to decline dramatically, but eventually a more basic disbelief in the existence of witches took root. Certain strains of skepticism in the power of demons, and so in the potential reality of demonic sorcery, have always existed in Christian thought, grounded in the basic notion that God would limit the actions of demons, perhaps restricting them entirely to operating by deceptive illusions. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed the rise of further skepticism about whether spiritual entities could affect material creation at all. Such thinking gained widespread acceptance among European elites only in the eighteenth century, but it greatly destabilized traditional understandings of witchcraft. Many Enlightenment thinkers identified continued belief in witchcraft as one of the many superstitions holding back European progress. Despite their best efforts, however, traditional understandings of witchcraft and traditional methods of recourse (employing counter-magic or simply identifying the witch and propitiating her to remove her spell) remained widespread among large segments of European society throughout the nineteenth century, and continued to some degree into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as well. Even the supposedly enlightened urban middle classes, scholarship increasingly has revealed, did not abandon such notions as easily or as fully as once was thought.

As Europe expanded its contact with the rest of the world in the early modern era, and especially as it embarked on its colonial domination of large sections of the globe, Europeans naturally carried their ideas of witchcraft with them and in large measure imposed these on non-European societies. In many cases, they interpreted the magical and religious practices of other cultures, especially those of the perceived primitive peoples of Africa and the Americas, as demonic

witchcraft. Of course, some Europeans also endeavored to understand the beliefs and practices of non-European societies on their own terms, and eventually the study of magic and witchcraft became an important component of European anthropology. In 1937, E. E. Evans-Pritchard published a particularly influential study of the Azande people of the upper Nile, attempting to understand how ideas of witchcraft and sorcery functioned within their culture. Among other conclusions, he noted a clear distinction between what he translated as “witchcraft,” which the Azande regarded as an inherent power stemming from a physical substance within the body, and “sorcery,” which they regarded as a system of powerful rites that anyone could learn to employ. His analysis of how both witchcraft and sorcery functioned in the context of social relations among the Azande, important for subsequent anthropological scholarship, also helped spark renewed interest in witchcraft among social historians of early modern Europe in the 1970s.

In recent decades, debate has ensued about whether the terms “witchcraft” and “sorcery,” laden with the weight of Europe’s particular history, should be applied in non-European contexts. Comparativists point to broad similarities in how such beliefs and practices manifest and function in various societies. Others contend that the European terminology of witchcraft is so bound to Christian demonology as to be inapplicable to any other culture, and native or at least more neutral terminologies should be used instead. To some degree, this debate mirrors that over whether the European vocabulary of religion can be applied appropriately outside of Western societies. More narrowly, it reflects the continuing disagreement among scholars over how central demonological concepts are to historical European understandings of witchcraft. Is a witch primarily a person who performs harmful sorcery of any kind, or is she primarily someone who has sold her soul to the devil in exchange for such power?

Another new meaning for witchcraft has developed in Europe and North America since the second half of the twentieth century with the rise of neopagan witchcraft, or Wicca. Drawing mainly on the now-discredited theories of Margaret Murray (1863-1963), a British scholar of folklore and religions, the founders of Wicca claimed that witchcraft was a pagan religion predating Christianity, focused on the worship of a god and goddess representing the primal forces of nature (the goddess would eventually come to dominate in most forms of Wicca). In fact, there is no evidence that any such beliefs or practices existed clandestinely in medieval and early modern Europe. Undoubtedly, aspects of pagan traditions endured in many forms in Christian Europe, but only as cultural vestiges, not coherent structures. Nevertheless, the success of modern neopaganism, both as a growing religion and as a component of popular culture (i.e. books, movies, and television shows featuring more-or-less neopagan witches), has clearly given witchcraft a new meaning that now must be counted among the many connotations the term can carry.