The Age of Magicians: Periodization in the History of European Magic

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Abstract
John Maynard Keynes once described Sir Isaac Newton, perhaps the greatest figure of the scientific revolution, as being “not the first of the age of reason” but “the last of the magicians.” Keynes was commenting, among other things, on Newton’s fascination with alchemy and the influence it may have had on his mathematical studies of gravitation and optics. This quip, no doubt originally deployed for its pithiness, raises broad questions of historical periodization.

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John Maynard Keynes once described Sir Isaac Newton, perhaps the greatest figure of the scientific revolution, as being “not the first of the age of reason” but “the last of the magicians.” Keynes was commenting, among other things, on Newton’s fascination with alchemy and the influence it may have had on his mathematical studies of gravitation and optics. This quip, no doubt originally deployed for its pithiness, raises broad questions of historical periodization. Was there an age of magicians, sharply distinct from the modern era of scientific reason, and if so when did one age pass into the other? Did the premodern world comprise, as Keynes’s remark might be taken to imply, an unbroken epoch uniformly benighted by its magical beliefs and superstitions, or were there, in fact, distinct ages of magic into which the past might be divided? Unpacking these questions will involve mapping the history of magic onto the standard scheme of European periodization, from late antique to early modern, and seeing what concurrences or disruptions occur.

As Joan Kelly-Gadol once famously asked concerning women, one can also ask about magicians—did they have a Renaissance? Similarly, did magic un-

I am grateful to Edward Peters for his criticisms and suggestions, which greatly improved this article.

1. Delivered in earlier speeches, the comment was published in Keynes, “Newton, the Man,” in Newton: Tercentenary Celebrations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1947), 27.


dergo a Reformation or a scientific revolution? Looking earlier, did magic experience distinctly late antique or early medieval transformations? Did it have a high medieval zenith or suffer through a late medieval crisis or decline?

When seeking distinct periods within the history of magic, one must begin by asserting that magic does, in fact, have a history. Many people, some scholars not excepted, tend to regard common magical practices as essentially unchanging elements of folk culture. Other scholars recognize how “magic” in any period is always understood and measured, both by contemporaries and by modern historians, in terms of other structures of knowledge or belief (religious, scientific, legal, and so forth) that always change. The modern conceptions of religion and science, against which magic is so often contrasted, are post-Reformation and really post-Enlightenment constructions, and the farther back in time one imposes such distinctions the less useful they become. Certainly nothing like the modern Western distinction between magic and religion existed in antiquity, and this has led to arguments that we should dispense with the terms “magic” and “magician” altogether, and focus instead on identifying different forms of ritual expertise. Yet antiquity


also bequeathed later Western societies the term “magic” (Greek mageia, later Latin magia), amid a plethora of other terms for various “magical” practices. Originally, these terms may have carried clear and distinct meanings, but usage frequently became blurred and connotations tended to overlap.

Magical practices, as well as the conceptualization and frequent condemnation of mageia and related categories, underwent major shifts in Greco-Roman antiquity. The place of magic in the classical world is so complex and varied, however, that it must remain outside the scope of this survey. The advent of Christianity and its rise to eventual hegemony over the ancient West inaugurated a new era in the history of magic. Yet the rise of Christianity was as slow and gradual as was the ancient world’s purported “decline and fall.” There was no sharp break between antiquity and the Middle Ages, but rather a long transition from the late antique to the early medieval period, and the history of magic reflects some of the nature of this shift.

LATE ANTIQUITY AND THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

Early Christian authorities liked to envision themselves as standing distinct from, and ultimately triumphing over, pagan antiquity. Conceptualizations of magic played an important role in this rhetoric. Roman society had always tolerated a multiplicity of religious cults and observances, even if it castigated some as dangerous or depraved. Superstitio was the most common category Roman writers used to denounce unrespectable beliefs or ritual practices, and one of the cults they often derided in this way was Christianity. Christian authorities responded with an even more sweeping conceptual counterattack. The Apostle Paul had declared that all pagan deities were in fact Christian demons, and so church authorities held that the rites of all pagan cults were superstitious and all effects supposedly derived from them were magical.

11. Dale B. Martin, Inventing Superstition: From the Hippocrates to the Christians (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), traces in detail the fluctuations of one category, although he notes that changing elite conceptualizations did not reflect or affect popular opinion. More generally, see Dickie, Magic and Magicians.
Quite early in the Christian tradition, writers such as Ignatius of Antioch (died ca. 107) and Justin Martyr (died ca. 165) presented Christ’s birth as a moment of triumph over magic. They interpreted the three magi whom the Gospel of Matthew describes coming from the east to submit themselves to Christ as representatives of pagan astrology and astral magic, now broken by the advent of Christianity.\(^{14}\)

The notion that Christ had come at least partially to overcome superstitious and magical paganism was central to early Christianity. Ironically, to many non-Christian observers Christ and his disciples appeared to be magicians themselves, performing wonders by word and gesture, and by the invocation of spiritual power.\(^{15}\) Yet, although the effects they were believed to achieve might appear similar, Christianity would brook no possible connection between divine power and demonic, pagan magic. Magicians in league with the devil were presented as archenemies of the new faith. The second-century author Irenaeus, in his \textit{Contra haereticos}, cast the magician Simon Magus as the father of all heretics and the chief opponent of the early church, embodied in the Apostle Peter.\(^{16}\) Early church fathers established magic as the antithesis of Christianity by what has been called the “demonization of magic” in late antiquity.\(^{17}\) In contrast to the common antique notion that


rites might function by drawing on the power of a range of spiritual entities, Christianity established a strictly binary universe.\(^{18}\) While Christian rites drew on beneficent divine power, all other rites drew on the necessarily evil force of demons. Magicians, by the very performance of their arts, entered into pacts with demons and so became agents of the devil.\(^{19}\)

As Christianity gained ever more political support in the late Roman empire, this moral and essentialist condemnation of all activities categorized as magic came to stand beside Roman legal condemnations that generally focused only on forms of magic believed to cause direct harm.\(^{20}\) Yet the interaction of these two modes of condemnation could be quite fluid. So could the definitions of the categories employed. For example, *superstitio* was condemned by Roman and Christian authorities alike, but through the fourth century, legal codes often avoided enumerating specific activities that entailed superstition, so that either Christian or pagan conceptions of the term could be employed as was most convenient.\(^{21}\) By the early fifth century, more definitive legislation was enshrined in the Theodosian Code of 438,\(^{22}\) and the meanings of terms became more fixed.\(^{23}\) Still, strict laws do not necessarily imply strict, or at least not universally strict, enforcement, and historians have tremendous difficulty determining how firmly definitions were interpreted and applied in specific situations.

From the sixth through the tenth centuries—in other words, for the whole of what is usually regarded as the early medieval period—most descriptions of magic continued to emphasize connections to paganism. Bishops Caesarius of Arles (d. 542) and Martin of Braga (d. 580) condemned superstitious beliefs and practices that involved observing pagan rites or festivals, notions of favor-


\(^{19}\) Augustine links magic and superstition to demonic pacts in *De civitate dei* 8.19 and *De doctrina christiana* 2.20. He argues against the notion that there are any “good” demons on whose power humans might draw in (inter alia) *De civitate dei* 9.2.


able or unfavorable times for particular actions, or systems of omens and signs.\textsuperscript{24} Some two hundred years later, a brief list of superstitions appended to the canons of the Council of Leptinnes (modern Estinnes) seems to describe largely similar concerns.\textsuperscript{25} More directly magical rites, such as healing, performing divination, ensuring conception of children during sex, or aborting pregnancies, were also tied directly to pagan superstition.\textsuperscript{26} Such linkages continued into the tenth century. The famous canon \textit{Episcopi}, dating probably to the early 900s and later to become foundational for late-medieval and early-modern concepts of witches’ night-flight to diabolical sabbaths, mentions the practice of “sorcery and witchcraft” (“sortilegam et maleficam artem”), and also describes fairly elaborate cultic worship of the pagan goddess Diana, or rather a demon appearing as Diana.\textsuperscript{27} The canon actually appears to be a composite of two different texts, but came to be read as a single document. Its description of a cult to Diana came to imply magical paganism generally.\textsuperscript{28}


\textsuperscript{26} See esp. Caesarius of Arles, sermons 50–52 (\textit{Sermons} 1:253–62).


\textsuperscript{28} Werner Tschacher, “Der Flug durch die Luft zwischen Illusionstheorie und Realitätsbeweis: Studien zum sog. Kanon Episcopi und zum Hexenflug,” \textit{Zeitschrift
From Caesarius of Arles in the sixth century to bishop Burchard of Worms, writing in the early eleventh, church authorities frequently linked magic to the remnants of pagan beliefs and practices. Yet, while there is no question that Christianity continued to encounter paganism at its borders in this period, there is significant debate about the degree to which pagan practices endured within Christianized regions. Some scholars judge that sources such as these, with their heavy inflection of paganism, simply recapitulate the standard language of earlier authorities and offer no reliable information about real magical practices continuing in Christian society. Others find such evaluations too “pessimistic,” and, while recognizing the heavy influence of tradition, maintain that these sources must reflect some degree of real practice. Certainly the sources do accurately reflect the concerns of Christian authorities. When seeking to condemn magical practices, whether real or abstract, they most often deployed the traditional early Christian language of opposition to paganism. They did so even as Christian society accommodated a number of practices that to modern scholars might appear to be magical, leading Valerie Flint to write of the dynamic growth and “rise of magic” in this period.

Despite Christianity’s strong categorization of magical rites as demonic and therefore redolent of pagan idolatry, Christian culture was always more tolerant of a variety of practices than its stark rhetoric would imply. In the third century, for example, the lay Christian author Julius Africanus supported the
use of healing rites and charms for such purposes as winning love or defeating enemies in battle. In Anglo-Saxon England in the tenth century, a monastic medical manual recorded healing spells and recipes. By very dint of their approval, we can be sure that neither author considered the rites he described to be magical. Christianity’s position was absolute—that which was magic was demonic and therefore condemned; that which was approved could not be magic. Instead of relying on demonic power, approved rites were conceived as drawing on natural forces or divine power. Much of the early medieval history of magic involves Christian authorities laying down a veil of Christianization to rescue certain rites and practices from condemnation. A pagan shrine could be converted to a saint’s chapel, or a spell invoking Odin could be transformed into a prayer invoking Christ. Far from being (entirely) capitulations in the face of persistent practices, such transformations performed real work, breaking the reliance of such rites on demons and realigning them with divine power.

The history of magic in the late antique and early medieval period thus reflects the long, nuanced process by which a new culture formed in western Europe out of classical, Christian, and Germanic elements. Christianity did not simply subsume earlier cultures, but accommodated itself to them in complex ways. While some outlines are clear, much work needs to be done to map more precisely specific developments and transitions in the history of magic in this long age. Can distinct developments in the conceptualization of magic be found by more careful analysis of ecclesiastical sources, or were sermons, handbooks for the correction of the laity, and the canons of church councils really too beholden to the categorizations of earlier authorities to reflect changing practices or changing concerns? If they were, what of other genres of writing that record magical practices—histories, legal codes, hagiographies, or imaginative literature? Using these types of sources carries no

38. For some suggestions, see Murray, “Missionaries and Magic,” 194–98.
fewer complications, and not enough focused research has yet been done on them to yield firm conclusions. Law codes are especially vexing.\textsuperscript{39} The early medieval period, just as the late imperial era, produced some harsh condemnations of magic, such as in Charlemagne’s \textit{Admonitio generalis} of 789.\textsuperscript{40} Yet we know little about whether such legislation led to any swell in prosecution of magical crimes.

Charting the frequency of sorcery and witch trials is one important way of marking different phases of the history of magic in later periods, but may well prove impossible for this early era. What descriptions we have of actual magical practices in these centuries are limited and very questionable. The period itself is remarkably fluid. Both urban and rural society underwent dramatic changes. States waxed and waned. Structures of belief and ritual forms mingled and evolved, with the Roman church seeking to extend its authority but generally lacking the power to enforce the level of doctrinal coherence that it later imposed. The history of magic reflects these transformations.\textsuperscript{41} More attention to that history could help add definition to this age.

\begin{center}
\textbf{HIGH AND LATE MEDIEVAL DEVELOPMENTS}
\end{center}

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, western Europe became somewhat more stable. Certain enduring political entities (the kingdoms of England and France, for example) emerged, and the church became a more centralized institution under firmer direction from Rome. As institutions and structures became more permanent and complex, writing and bureaucratic record-keeping increased significantly, with enormous consequences for European culture.\textsuperscript{42} Such changes may have done little to affect common magical practices, but they had profound effects on how governing and administrative elites conceived of magic and acted against it.

In the legal realm, Europe underwent a revolution in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Scholars rediscovered and reintroduced Roman law, as codified in the sixth-century \textit{Corpus iuris civilis} of the Byzant-

\textsuperscript{39} Early medieval legal literature is surveyed in Peters, “Medieval Church and State,” 187–206.
\textsuperscript{40} Monumenta Germaniae Historica, \textit{Capitularia regum Francorum}, 1:53–62.
\textsuperscript{41} Unfortunately, the “Transformations of the Roman World” project, conducted in the 1990s and resulting in a series of volumes published into the early 2000s, did not include magic or superstition as one of its thematic foci.
tine emperor Justinian, beginning in the law schools of Bologne around 1100. From there, Roman law spread to become the foundation, along with canon and feudal law, for legal structures across western Europe. Within the church, canon law became much more structured, and systems of enforcement—church courts—became more highly developed. The legal revolution of the high Middle Ages directly shaped European jurisprudence through at least the eighteenth century. More broadly, some scholars argue that the intellectual shifts that supported this revolution, particularly the increasingly bureaucratic nature of governments and courts, helped to transform Europe into a “persecuting society” at this time. As ruling elites came to identify, construct, and punish marginal groups, practitioners of magic were one (albeit a later one) of their areas of focus.

Certainly the legal changes of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had a major effect on how magic was understood and condemned. Above all, the introduction of inquisitorial procedure in place of the accusatorial procedure that had prevailed in most legal proceedings in the early medieval period, and especially the introduction of judicial torture, shaped how charges of magic were handled, and in some ways how the use of magic was conceptualized.

Accusatorial approaches to rendering judgments had placed the burden of proof on the accuser, who was responsible for proving the guilt of the party against whom he brought a charge. Magical crimes, due to their inherently covert and occult nature, were difficult to prove conclusively. Moreover, if an accuser failed to prove guilt, he was often subject to judicial retribution. When direct proof was lacking, a decision could be submitted to judicial ordeal. Authorities would require the accused to grasp hot irons or be submerged in water, believing that the outcomes of these rituals would reflect a divine verdict of guilt or innocence. Even in these cases, however, or perhaps especially so given the invocation of divine judgment, any accuser would want to be very certain of the accuracy of his charge. Thus the structure of legal procedure in early medieval Europe may have worked to inhibit accusations of magic.49 This system declined rapidly in the twelfth century, however, mainly as a result of strong ecclesiastical opposition to the rituals of ordeal, which decretals issued from the Fourth Lateran Council officially condemned.50 In its place grew a new system more conducive to trying magicians and eventually witches.

Under inquisitorial procedure, an accuser could still bring charges in a court, but now the inquisitorial tribunal was responsible for investigating and prosecuting the case. Also, magistrates could begin an investigation (an inquiry or inquisitio) without any formal accusation of a crime, but instead based merely on reports of suspect reputation or “ill-fame” (infamia).51 The duty of inquiring into proper belief was incumbent on every bishop in Christendom, but in 1184 Pope Lucius III issued the decretal Ad abolendam, calling for bishops to conduct much more systematic and regular (at least yearly) investigations into heresy.52 In 1231, with the decretal Ille humani generis, Pope Gregory IX called on members of the Dominican order in Regensburg to

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undertake inquisitorial activity, thereby inaugurating the practice of specially
deputed papal inquisitors of heretical depravity, usually from the Dominican
and to a lesser extent the Franciscan mendicant orders. These inquisitors
bore primary responsibility for establishing inquisitorial procedures and the
workings of inquisitorial courts.

Although deputed to act against heresy, church inquisitors soon began
hearing cases involving magic. In 1258, Pope Alexander IV issued the decre-
tal *Quod super nonnullis*, in which he addressed the question whether charges
deviation or sorcery (‘‘divinationibus et sortilegiis’’) fell under the juris-
diction of papal inquisitors. He ruled that inquisitors should not handle such
cases unless the magical practices ‘‘should manifestly savor of heresy.’’ This
restriction could prove quite elastic, however, as any magic that involved the
supplication or worship of demons, as Christian authorities considered most
magic did, would likely be heretical. In 1326, in the bull *Super illius specula*,
Pope John XXII issued a blanket excommunication against all those who
performed magical rites that (supposedly) involved demonic invocation and
demon worship. Inquisitors themselves took their jurisdiction over magic
seriously. As early as 1270, an anonymous summa on the office of inquisition
included discussion of ‘‘idolatrous sorcery.’’ Writing in 1323 or 1324, the
famous inquisitor Bernard Gui included sections on sorcery in his major
handbook *Practica inquisitionis heretice pravitatis*. Half a century later, in 1376,
the Catalan inquisitor Nicolau Eymeric produced an even more influential
manual, *Directorium inquisitorum*, with extensive discussion of the heretical
nature of demonic magic. His treatise remained widely read for centuries,
particularly in the important 1578 edition by the Spanish jurist Francisco Peña, and so influenced inquisitorial thought well into the early modern period.\textsuperscript{60}

Although secular courts conducted the majority of the witch trials of the early modern period, they followed the same basic procedures developed in ecclesiastical courts in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Most basically, they generally adhered to a strict standard of proof that required, in capital cases, either the testimony of two eyewitnesses or the confession of the accused. As with courts operating under accusatorial justice, inquisitorial courts faced the dilemma that magical crime was almost by definition a secret and occult activity. Eyewitnesses were rare, and so the pressure to extract confessions to confirm preliminary indications (\textit{indicia}) of guilt mounted. The standard method used by inquisitorial courts to obtain confessions was torture. This method was, of course, employed in most of the major witch trials of the early modern period, but its introduction into legal procedures was a medieval development. The use of torture was grounded in Roman legal principles and followed the recovery of Roman law in the twelfth and thirteenth century. It was not church inquisitors but civic magistrates in Verona who were responsible for the first known application of judicial torture in medieval Europe in 1228.\textsuperscript{61}

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries not only set the legal stage for how magic would be handled for the next five centuries, they also set the pastoral and theological stage. Already in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, an increasingly organized and bureaucratic church began to intensify its pastoral efforts to instruct the laity in proper belief and practice, as well as to better instruct its own clergy in order to advance this program. These efforts also entailed greater ecclesiastical energy directed toward policing proper belief and practice. Naturally enough, church authorities became more cognizant of common magical practices widespread among the laity (and among the clergy as well).\textsuperscript{62} The year 1215 was pivotal, as the Fourth Lateran Council

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\textsuperscript{61} Peters, \textit{Torture}, 49; on reintroduction of torture generally in the medieval period, ibid., 40–54.

enacted major new policies, perhaps none more dramatic than the require-
ment for regular yearly confession by all Christians, shaping how religious
authorities would learn of and react to common magical practices, as well as
a whole range of other issues.63 The process of confession was not unlike the
process of inquisition. Both centered on an inquiry into personal beliefs and
the practices that reflected them.64 Both also affected how authorities learned
of magical practices that they feared were superstitious or worse, and both
helped to shape how authorities conceptualized the faults they believed such
practices entailed.

An intellectual revival also occurred in twelfth- and thirteenth-century
Europe, marked especially by the foundation of schools and eventually uni-
versities. Much more systematic forms of theology, and also demonology,
developed at these centers of scholastic learning, which shaped how authori-
ties understood magic to operate. The most well-known scholastic authority,
Thomas Aquinas, played a key role here, accommodating Aristotelian philos-
ophy to Christian belief in his great summas produced in the mid-thirteenth
century. Among other topics, he discussed how demons could operate at
the behest of magicians within the natural laws of an essentially Aristotelian
universe.65 Already in the first half of the thirteenth century, however, the
bishop of Paris William of Auvergne had produced foundational accounts of

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Jacques Le Goff and René Rémond, vol. 1, Des dieux de la Gaule à la papauté d’Avig-

63. Krzysztof Bracha, “Der Einfluß der neuen Frömmigkeit auf die spätmittelalter-
lische Kritik am Aberglauben im Reformschrifttum Mitteleuropas,” in Die “Neue
Frömmigkeit” in Europa im Spätmittelalter, ed. Marek Derwich and Martial Staub (Göt-
Lateran IV was fundamental for later concerns. On a range of issues beyond magic,
see Dyan Elliott, Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later

64. Drawing connections between inquisition, confession, Dominican pastoral ac-
tivity, and Lateran IV’s general emphasis on “care of souls” is Christine Caldwell,
“Dominican Inquisitors as ‘Doctors of Souls’: The Spiritual Discipline of Inquisition,
Inquisition Belong to Religious History?” American Historical Review 110 (2005): 11–
37, esp. 17–19. See also her forthcoming Righteous Persecution: Inquisition, Dominicans,
and Christianity in the Middle Ages (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press,
2009).

65. Thomas Linsenmann, Die Magie bei Thomas von Aquin, Veröffentlichungen des
Grabmann-Institutes 44 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000), summarizes sections deal-
ing with magic across several of Aquinas’s works.
how demons operated and lent their power to human magicians. Both these men were cited frequently by church authorities writing on magic and superstition in later centuries, and the scholastic demonology they represent was essential for all later learned conceptions of magic (including those that reacted against it). One scholar has even argued that the entire conception of witchcraft and witches’ interactions with demons was based on scholars’ profound anxieties about demonic existence deriving from thirteenth-century intellectual developments.

In addition to creating the intellectual framework in which magic was understood, the schools and universities of western Europe also provided the setting for a major new variety of magic to develop. As opposed to the typically simple spells and common charms that anyone, lay and cleric alike, might employ, systems of complex learned magic emerged in these years. These might focus on the workings of astrology or astral magic, alchemy to a lesser extent, or even complex ritual invocations of explicitly demonic power. Knowledge of these systems was bookish and restricted almost exclusively to clerical circles at the schools and courts of Europe. Most of the tracts and treatises on magic circulating in this milieu were based on the recovery of ancient writings and the influx of new texts from the advanced Muslim world that occurred in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and fired so much intellectual activity at the universities of Europe. This was also the


68. Kieckhefer, Magic in the Middle Ages, describes a “clerical underworld of necromancy” (pp. 151–75); Peters, Magician, describes low-level clerics operating in a courtly demimonde (pp. 112–25); Hilary Carey, Courting Disaster: Astrology at the English Court and University in the Later Middle Ages (London: Macmillan, 1992), and Jan R. Veenstra, Magic and Divination at the Courts of Burgundy and France: Text and Context of Laurens Pignon’s Contra les devineurs (1411), Brill’s Studies in Intellectual History 83 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), discuss particular courtly contexts.

variety of magic that stoked the concerns of educated authorities, from John XXII to Nicolau Eyermic to the theological faculty of the University of Paris, which condemned a range of mostly elite magical and superstitious practices in 1398.70

Concern over elite, often explicitly demonic magic also informed the construction of the stereotype of diabolical witchcraft in the early decades of the fifteenth century.71 Prosecutions for sorcery appear to have risen across the fourteenth and certainly the fifteenth centuries, with authorities increasingly applying their conviction in the necessarily demonic nature of virtually all magic to accusations of simple harmful sorcery (maleficium), although of course some, perhaps all, of this perceived rise may be a matter of the survival of sources.72 Nevertheless, the early fifteenth century certainly saw the establishment of at least the beginnings of the stereotype of diabolical witchcraft that would underlie the major witch hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.73 By century’s end, aspects of this stereotype were on their way to becoming universal, at least among theorists of witchcraft, demonologists, and prosecuting authorities, although care should also be taken to recognize the particular traditions and images of magic that continued to inform fifteenth-century accounts.74 The late fifteenth century, of course, saw the publication of the most infamous of all medieval treatises against witchcraft, Malleus maleficarum, in 1486. While this work in no sense presented a definitive picture of witchcraft—it was contested from the start, and the history of its reception and influence is problematic to say the least—it stands in a long

70. Veenstra, Magic and Divination, 138–43; Jean-Patrice Boudet, “Les condamna-
71. Bailey, “From Sorcery to Witchcraft.”
73. Michael D. Bailey, “The Medieval Concept of the Witches’ Sabbath,” Exem-
sanne, 1999).
The late medieval period—the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries—are often characterized as a period of crisis or decline, although this depiction of the era is increasingly being challenged by scholarship. From the perspective of the history of magic, such a characterization makes no sense. Instead, Christian authorities’ intellectual definition of magic progressed along already established lines that now yielded new ideas that would hold force well into the following centuries. Concern about magic and systems of prosecution were also developing. Yet, although they indicated a direction, these had not yet achieved the full, fatal forms they would come to assume in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. If fear and repression of witchcraft is to be defined as a crisis, it would be peculiar to locate it in the fifteenth century instead of later. Rather than an end point, in the history of magic the fifteenth century seems a moment of climactic transition. Intellectual understandings of magic and legal procedures for dealing with it were being perfected (if so positive a term can be applied to such a dismal development as witch hunts). Rather than old scenery being cleared away, the stage was being set for what was to come.

A NEW AGE OF EARLY MODERN MAGIC?

Given that so many enduring legal and intellectual structures for understanding magic were first established in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, that concern about magical practices appears to have mounted in the course of
the fourteenth century, and that the idea of diabolical witchcraft and the earliest real witch trials developed in the early fifteenth century, should any line be drawn through the history of magic around the year 1500? In the largest terms, the answer must be no. In many fundamental ways, the magical world of the fifteenth century did not differ dramatically from that of the sixteenth or even seventeenth (at least the early seventeenth). Nevertheless, major events obviously occurred around this benchmark year, affecting and altering the practice and perception of magic in western Europe, as they did so many other areas of European society and culture. The significance of these events must be considered.

Did magic have a Renaissance? That is, did the recovery of ancient texts, the revival of Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy in competition with the Aristotelianism that had so dominated the later medieval period, and perhaps most basically the strong affinity for ancient culture that characterized the Renaissance affect the history of magic? Certainly they did. Renaissance magical (and other) literature can appear to approach magic quite differently than earlier medieval texts,77 and Renaissance magicians could have far more complex notions of demonic beings than did typical medieval authors.78 Yet these differences amount more to shifting points of emphasis within broadly continuous magical traditions than truly fundamental changes in magical outlook.79 Learned Renaissance magicians like Marsilio Ficino stressed the spiritually enlightening and revelatory nature of magic, rather than the direct, wondrous effects it could produce in the physical world.80 This is not to say that Renaissance magicians did not believe magic capable of producing very real material effects, however, nor that earlier medieval magicians did not discuss the revelatory potential of some magic. Traditions focusing on the intellectual and spiritual value of magic stretch back to the fourteenth century.

and earlier.\textsuperscript{81} Strong Neoplatonic elements have been found in a (admittedly “solitary”) magical text from the early 1300s.\textsuperscript{82} Visionary and revelatory aspects of magic can be located in texts even from the thirteenth century, thus informing the whole late-medieval learned magical tradition.\textsuperscript{83} Clearly, then, what happened to magic among the learned circles of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy was no more than an intensification of focus on certain elements that had long been present in magical thought.

While the intellectual refinements of learned Renaissance magicians represent significant developments, they do not mark the wholesale overthrow of previous systems or the inauguration of utterly new forms.\textsuperscript{84} Moreover, these were also very limited developments, necessarily restricted to a small elite of highly educated men. More broadly across society, the “Renaissance” continued to prosecute witches, and to treat with great seriousness the perceived proliferation of common spells, charms, the evil eye, and so forth.\textsuperscript{85} In the realm of common magical practices, certainly the Reformation rather than the Renaissance (to rely on the classic dyad) had the greater effect. Did magic, then, have a Reformation?

Keith Thomas’s monumental \textit{Religion and the Decline of Magic} argued that the Reformation intensified reliance on and fear of magic in the early modern world. By eradicating what he termed the “magic of the medieval church”—the range of mostly apotropaic rituals and sacramal items that the church offi-


\textsuperscript{82} Sophie Page, “Image-Magic Texts and a Platonic Cosmology at St. Augustine’s, Canterbury, in the Late Middle Ages,” in \textit{Magic and the Classical Tradition}, 69–98, reference to the text’s “solitary” nature at 79.


\textsuperscript{85} The most recent survey to identify its focus specifically as the “Renaissance” is Matteo Duni, \textit{Under the Devil’s Spell: Witches, Sorcerers, and the Inquisition in Renaissance Italy}, The Villa Rossa Series: Intercultural Perspectives on Italy and Europe 2 (Florence: Syracuse University in Florence, 2007).
cially sanctioned—Protestant authorities in England caused people to rely ever more heavily on common spells, methods of divination, and the cunning folk who practiced them. People also became more fearful of witches and the threat of demonic assault, which Protestantism of course in no way denied.86 This view is basically correct, but probably gives too much credit to Protestant antipathy to “magic” (if one defines prayer and other religious rites as “magical,” as Thomas did with “the magic of the medieval church”). That is, Protestant theology certainly did reconceive how divine power was believed to operate in the world, and how human beings could propitiate and direct that power.87 But Protestantism in no way “desacralized” the world or stripped away the notion that numinous forces operated directly in people’s everyday lives.88 In particular, Protestant demonology differed very little from earlier medieval thought.

Protestantism, especially in the changes it imposed on forms of worship, did alter common magical practices, leading to the formation of distinctly Protestant forms of magic and superstition.89 Catholic sacramentals, often appropriated by the laity for magical use, fell out of favor in Protestant lands. As befitted a faith more focused on the direct experience of the word of God, through preaching but especially through reading, Protestant magic more often incorporated the Bible, hymnals, prayer books, and other sacral texts.90 Although Catholic devotion to saints and their relics became taboo, Protestants developed notions of protective power attached to images or items associated with the great Reformers.91 Of course, earlier medieval magic also drew heavily on religious forms, and no doubt magical practices had always changed as religious ones did.92 The late-medieval surge in devotion to the

Eucharist, for example, probably led to more common spells reliant on the host or the imagery of the body of Christ. Thus while the changes that the Reformation may have generated in magical practices were no doubt new, the fact that religious developments would affect magical ones was certainly not.

Of course, the post-1500 early modern period is most well known not for new systems of magic, but for new levels of legal condemnation and prosecution of magical crimes, above all witchcraft. As already noted, the concept of diabolical witchcraft developed in the fifteenth century, as did the earliest major series of witch trials. Scholars often point to a pause in the escalation of trials during the early to middle years of the sixteenth century. This plateau, and in some areas clear reduction, in trials is reflected in a pause in the production of new antiwitchcraft treatises, as well as a hiatus in the publication of earlier works—*Malleus maleficarum*, for example, which was issued in fourteen editions between 1486 and 1520, was not reprinted again for over half a century between 1521 and 1576. Major series of trials began to erupt again after 1560, and a new wave of antiwitch literature began appearing in the late 1500s and into the 1600s. Moreover, while church inquisitors had often directed early trials, now generally secular courts took the lead in prosecuting witchcraft. Thus there do appear to be grounds for distinguishing a “medieval” phase of witchcraft and witch hunting from an “early modern” phase.

In a larger sense, however, if witch hunting is to be taken as somehow characteristic of a distinct early modern period, we must ask how pervasive that practice was across Europe in the whole of this era. In fact, major witch hunts claiming hundreds of victims really flourished for only about a century, from the mid-1500s to the mid-1600s, with over three quarters of Europe’s major hunts taking place in this period. While most states only altered or repealed their legislation against witchcraft in the late seventeenth century or

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93. Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 338–42, discusses Eucharistic magic; Tavuzzi, *Renaissance Inquisitors*, 205–8, goes so far as to suggest that actual groups desecrating or at least denigrating the newly important Eucharist may lie behind notions of witches’ sabbaths.


more often in the course of the eighteenth, many major courts had already put serious breaks on the process of witch-hunting much earlier. In France, the Parlement of Paris refused to sanction the execution of any witches after 1625. The Spanish and Roman Inquisitions stopped executing witches (although they meted out other punishments, and other courts continued to operate in their territories) after 1610. Moreover, major witch hunts were never evenly spread across the continent. Recent scholarship has continually reduced the estimate of the overall number of witch trials that occurred in Europe, while assigning them to more precise geographies. The trials overwhelmingly took place in central Europe, in the fragmented lands of the German empire, with perhaps as many as six out of every seven witches executed between 1560 and 1660 dying within (pre-1648) imperial borders.

The great spasm of early modern witch-hunting thus appears less a distinctive feature of an entire era of European history than it does a particularly German/imperial phenomenon (a number of major hunts took place in non-germanophone imperial lands), localized to a century when the empire was profoundly shaken by political and confessional strife. The scope of truly major witch-hunting can be limited even more by attending to the fact that only a few massive flare-ups, “superhunts” as they have been labeled, account for around one third of German totals. None of this is to say that witches did not die elsewhere in Europe. No major region was entirely free from trials, and sometimes these trials spun out of control. England, Scotland, France, Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Sweden, Poland, Hungary—all experienced major hunts. Yet such events were even greater aberrations in these lands than they were in the German empire. Once the aberrant nature of massive hunts is recognized, then the normal level of concern about witchcraft and the occasional, limited prosecution of suspected witches that occurred in this century from the mid-1500s to the mid-1600s does not appear so unique, but

rather matches much more closely the patterns of previous and subsequent periods.\footnote{103}

Of course, when reconstructing the general course of Europe’s magical history, the great hunts cannot be written out of the picture. The fact that aberrations occur at particular times and not others is an important part of any history. But the great witch hunts, and the seemingly inevitable dynamics of witch-hunting, have attracted so much academic attention that a special effort is often required to set them in proper perspective, even for the history of witchcraft, let alone the overall history of magic.\footnote{104} We need careful histories of other kinds of magic in the “era of the witch hunts” in order to map out real periods. Studies focusing on Mediterraneen lands may take the lead here. The large, bureaucratic, standing inquisitions of southern Europe (the Spanish, Portuguese, Roman, and Venetian) typically took a moderate approach to charges of diabolical witchcraft, and they were in a position to enforce this moderation across large jurisdictions.\footnote{105} Because of this, other forms of magic, and other kinds of magical concerns—love magic, the evil eye, and so forth—have been more visible to historians in these regions.\footnote{106}

Only when we have a more nuanced understanding of the histories of all varieties of magic in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries will we be able to delineate any clear ages of magic within this period, or firmly argue for divisions separating this period from others. Certainly how Europeans imag-

\footnote{103. Robin Briggs, \textit{Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft} (New York: Viking Penguin, 1996), is a major study stressing how focus on major hunts has skewed perception of witchcraft. Nowhere has a single hunt so overshadowed an entire body of historiography as in colonial America, so it is particularly welcome that a trenchant analysis of a more “normal” sequence of trials has finally focused there: Richard Godbeer, \textit{Escaping Salem: The Other Witch Hunt of 1692} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).


ined, practiced, and especially prosecuted magic changed in this era. The question is whether the history of magic in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries differed sharply enough from that in the fourteenth and fifteenth to support drawing a major periodic break around 1500. The answer, at the moment, would be no. Instead, points of focus shifted and certain preexisting elements intensified while others declined. What changes did occur seem quite comparable to patterns of change in earlier centuries. Rather than conforming to the traditional divide between a medieval and an early modern period, the history of magic conforms more easily to the alternate periodization of “old Europe,” which envisions a unified period of connected developments stretching from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries through the seventeenth and into the eighteenth.107

THE END OF THE AGE OF MAGIC

What changed in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to bring to an end this long period of continuous although evolving magical traditions? In short, Europe, or at least European elites, became “disenchanted.” A key feature of Western modernity, according to the sociologist Max Weber, was its “elimination of magic from the world.”108 Important segments of society lost their belief, or at least their willingness to assert a firm belief, in the real effectiveness of magic and indeed in the reality of a great deal of spiritual or supernatural activity in the material universe. A new witchcraft statute passed in England in 1736 might be taken as indicative of this change. By this time, English courts had not tried a witch for nearly twenty years, and they had not executed a witch for over fifty (lynching and other forms of popular violence, of course, continued).109 This statute now eliminated witchcraft as a legally recognized crime. It went further, however, and criminalized any claim to perform witchcraft or otherwise exercise magical powers as fraud.

To oversimplify a complicated matter, the British government declared that witchcraft did not really exist.\textsuperscript{110}

The Scientific Revolution used to receive a good deal of credit for the eradication of serious belief in magical forces among European elites, but especially since the 1980s historians have argued that the Scientific Revolution itself was not a coherent, uniformly progressive movement, and many of its elements were in no way antithetical to magic.\textsuperscript{111} Stuart Clark, in particular, has demonstrated that early modern scientific thought was for the most part entirely compatible with demonology and belief in magic.\textsuperscript{112} Such compatibility is certainly reflected in Newton’s deep interest in alchemy, and is also visible, in a way, in other scientific authorities’ view that Newton’s theory of gravitation itself represented an “occult” force.\textsuperscript{113} One of the clearest embodiments of this compatibility was Newton’s contemporary Joseph Glanvill, who wrote on various scientific matters, but also, six years prior to the publication of \textit{Principia mathematica}, produced \textit{Saducismus triumphatus}, applying principles of the new science to the operation of spirits in the world and rejecting any skepticism about the reality of witchcraft.\textsuperscript{114}

There was, of course, also skepticism in this age, and increasingly this was a fuller form of skepticism than that which had characterized earlier periods, when those challenging the paradigm of witchcraft had typically limited themselves to denying only particular aspects of the witch stereotype, such as night-flight, the physical reality of the sabbath, or witches’ transformations into animals, or had claimed that witchcraft, while likely real, could not reli-


ably be proven in courts. Now some authorities denied any reality to demonic power in the world, and thus the entire basis of witchcraft and many other forms of magic. After the precocious Reginald Scot in the sixteenth century, one of the first such full skeptics was Thomas Hobbes, who questioned the real power of spiritual forces in the world in his *Leviathan* in 1651. Such skepticism impinged on divine as much as on demonic power, and in 1670 Baruch Spinoza issued a profound denial of the need for miracles in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. Returning more closely to matters of magic and witchcraft, at the end of the seventeenth century Balthasar Bekker argued against demonic power and for a fairly thorough disenchantment of the world in his *De Betoverde Weereld*.

In the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, opposition to superstition—meaning both belief in magic and the persecution of supposed sorcerers and witches, but also what were now deemed irrational elements of religion—became a major project of European intellectual elites. This opposition was not as straightforward as is often presented, but their efforts did finally bring about a fairly thorough disenchantment at least at the upper levels of European society. Of course, changes in elite understanding and


in legal structures did not immediately alter common beliefs and practices. Magic and witchcraft continued to be “realities” for many people in Europe throughout the nineteenth century. A periodization focused exclusively on common magical practices, especially among rural populations, might well not see any significant change in the history of magic until the end of the nineteenth century, or even well into the twentieth century, at least in some regions of Europe. As this article located a significant periodic break in legal and intellectual changes in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, however, it seems appropriate to see the end of a major period in the profound legal and especially intellectual changes occurring in the eighteenth century. The history of magic has of course continued in Europe after the Enlightenment, but that magic, however it has been practiced or believed in, has existed in a very different world. The modern “age of reason,” as Keynes termed it, generally sees itself as fundamentally opposed to the foolish superstition of any serious belief in magic.

CONCLUSION

In describing Newton as the last of the magicians, Keynes implied that a line drawn through the eighteenth century created a binary division in Western history. The modern age of reason that followed was barely two hundred years old when Keynes spoke. The preceding age of magicians stretched back millennia. Newton was “the last of the Babylonians and Sumerians, the last great mind which looked out on the visible and intellectual world with the same eyes as those who began to build our intellectual inheritance rather less than 10,000 years ago.” Again, Keynes surely did not intend his remarks to bear all that much analytic weight. Still, despite the degree of hyperbole, his statement is not entirely inaccurate. While all civilizations in Western history have questioned the limits of magic and the boundaries between what the modern West defines as the natural and the supernatural, and while skepticism always existed to some degree, never before the modern era had a civilization so completely denied the possibility of real spiritual entities or occult forces operating within and helping to shape material reality. Never


123. Keynes, “Newton, the Man,” 27.
before had a civilization put so little real credence in the notion that certain
people had particular abilities to manipulate such forces, gained either
through special personal qualities, secret learning, or pacts with evil powers.

Nevertheless, this article has argued that there have been other important
breaks in the history of magic. Certainly the ascendancy of Christianity
marked one. Christianity’s eventual, nearly total hegemony over European
societies and its sharp binary division of the spiritual universe into opposing
divine and demonic realms created very different terrain for magic than had
existed in antiquity. The period of Christianity’s rise to ascendency was long,
and even longer were the centuries in which Christian authorities persisted
in framing magic almost entirely in terms of their faith’s ancient competition
with paganism. New paradigms emerged in the legal and intellectual revolu-
tions of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. While other important changes
occurred in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, no line that can be drawn
around 1500 seems quite as fundamental for the history of magic as that
drawn around 1200.124

We have, then, an enormously long period of magic in the Christian West
stretching from (very roughly) the fourth or fifth centuries to (more precisely)
the eighteenth, divided into two substantial halves. Some significant divisions
can, in turn, be drawn through the second half. Much more research needs
to be done on all aspects of magic, including intellectual conceptions and
legal prohibitions, during the first half in order to discern what subdivisions
may be appropriate there. Elite descriptions and legal condemnations will
likely always be the most accessible information historians have about magic
in any period. Difficult as the task may be, however, efforts must also be
made to uncover evidence of actual common practices. This becomes much
easier, obviously, in the modern period, and important changes have also
been revealed in the early modern era. Medieval historians must try to join
this effort. If major changes in common magical practices could be charted,
this would add significantly to our ability to discern different ages of magic.

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124. See Murray, “Missionaries and Magic,” 196–97, for a suggestion of how
early-medieval magical attitudes only fully played out in the long twelfth century. On
new attitudes toward magic at least among elite society after 1200, note John Larner,
*Italy in the Age of Dante and Petrarch, 1216–1380*, Longman History of Italy 2 (London