Summer 2010

Witchcraft Mythologies and Persecutions (review)

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 Religion Commons, Medieval History Commons, and the Other History Commons

The complete bibliographic information for this item can be found at http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/history_pubs/19. For information on how to cite this item, please visit http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/howtocite.html.
Witchcraft Mythologies and Persecutions (review)

Abstract
This volume is the third in a series deriving from a conference held in Budapest in 1999. While the first volume focused on communication with spirits and spirit possession, and the second examined the place of demons and spirits in learned demonology and common belief (see reviews in Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft 1.2 [2006]: 257–60; 3.1 [2008]: 99–101), this volume deals directly with the topic of witchcraft, which the editors identify as "the most central theme of our conference" (p. 1). As in the previous volumes, most of the articles collected here focus on the early modern period, with brief forays back into the Middle Ages (and in one case into deep antiquity), along with some more extended considerations of the continuation of witchcraft beliefs into modern times. The authors approach their topics from the disciplines of history, anthropology, and ethnography. Again as with the previous volumes, some articles are inevitably stronger than others. Some are quite short and tentative in their conclusions, seeming not to have been expanded much, if at all, from the conference papers that were their origin. A number of articles are very worthwhile, however, and as a whole this volume shares the strength with its earlier companions of including a large number of articles that focus on eastern European lands, which are typically relegated to the periphery of European witchcraft studies.

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

Comments

Rights
All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations used for purposes of scholarly citation, none of this work may be reproduced in any form by any means without written permission from the publisher. For information address the University of Pennsylvania Press, 3905 Spruce Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104-4112

This book review is available at Iowa State University Digital Repository: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/history_pubs/19
Witchcraft Mythologies and Persecutions (review)

Michael D. Bailey

Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft, Volume 5, Number 1, Summer 2010, pp. 132-134 (Review)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: 10.1353/mrw.0.0164

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mrw/summary/v005/5.1.bailey.html
that there is no general agreement that prehistoric rock art in Eurasia represents shamans in action, but deals with this simply by referring approvingly to those scholars who want it to do so.Repeatedly, he acknowledges that Hungarian academics have long disputed whether there are clear traces of Siberian shamanism in the folklore of their own nation. He never, however, lays out the arguments of those who oppose the idea and then addresses them, preferring instead to quote—briefly, repeatedly, and warmly—those who espouse it. Once again, the lore concerned is treated as completely timeless, without much regard to how and when it was collected. It is always compared with the Siberian data, similarities being highlighted at every possible point and differences brushed aside, with no attempt to see how the same activities and ideas relate to those found among other European cultures. To my mind, Hungary falls within a well-defined, supraethnic, southeast European cultural province in which certain individuals are believed to send out their own spirits in their sleep to do battle in the apparent world for the good of their communities, making a contrast with the dramatic public performances, trances, journeys in spirit worlds, and alliances with spirit-helpers of Siberian and Arctic shamans. Only a full and systematic discussion of the evidence can tackle the problem of how much the two are related.

Nonetheless, the quality of Mihály Hoppál, as scholar and person, is so high that any of his work is bound to be of interest and importance, and this latest one has both.

RONALD HUTTON
Bristol University


This volume is the third in a series deriving from a conference held in Budapest in 1999. While the first volume focused on communication with spirits and spirit possession, and the second examined the place of demons and spirits in learned demonology and common belief (see reviews in Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft 1.2 [2006]: 257–60; 3.1 [2008]: 99–101), this volume deals directly with the topic of witchcraft, which the editors identify as “the most central theme of our conference” (p. 1). As in the previous volumes, most of the articles collected here focus on the early modern period, with
brief forays back into the Middle Ages (and in one case into deep antiquity),
along with some more extended considerations of the continuation of witch-
craft beliefs into modern times. The authors approach their topics from the
disciplines of history, anthropology, and ethnography. Again as with the pre-
vious volumes, some articles are inevitably stronger than others. Some are
quite short and tentative in their conclusions, seeming not to have been ex-
panded much, if at all, from the conference papers that were their origin. A
number of articles are very worthwhile, however, and as a whole this volume
shares the strength with its earlier companions of including a large number
of articles that focus on eastern European lands, which are typically relegated
to the periphery of European witchcraft studies.

The editors have divided the articles in this volume into three sections.
The first, “Mythologies,” deals mainly with the concept of the witches’ sab-
bath, and is the most thematically coherent. The second, “Legal Mechanisms,
Social Contexts,” is more hodgepodge, with articles focusing in various ways
on the operations of witch trials and the conditions behind them in diverse
places and periods. The third section, on “Witchcraft and Folklore,” also
covers fairly wide ground, but the articles here are unified at least by a com-
mon methodological problem: how does one (and need one) identify and
work specifically with traces of folkloric beliefs embedded in records of witch
trials and testimonies of witchcraft?

The first section begins with an article by Martine Ostorero summarizing
the research that went into the 1999 volume *L’imaginaire du sabbat*, not yet
published at the time of the original Budapest conference. *L’imaginaire du
sabbat* edited and analyzed all the major early witchcraft sources composed in
the 1430s. Although the volume itself is now available, a summary in English
of its important conclusions is valuable. Next in this section is the record of
a roundtable discussion in which four scholars addressed Carlo Ginzburg’s
provocative work on the origins and nature of the sabbath, with Ginzburg
responding. This is followed by an excellent piece by Gábor Klaniczay in
which he carefully parses the connections between spiritual visions and
witchcraft. At one level, of course, visionary experience has nothing to do
with the practice of *maleficium*, yet ideas of witchcraft often contain elements
of visionary experience, nowhere more so than in the concept of the sabbath,
generally held to be illusory by authorities. Klaniczay brings a number of key
issues to the surface of these troubled waters.

In a particularly interesting article in the next section, Polina Melik Simon-
ian contrasts Russian witch hunts with their Western counterparts. She con-
cludes that both Western and Eastern trials focused on “marginal” people.
While in the West, however, such marginal people tended to come from
within given communities, in Muscovy, foreigners—non-Russian and non-
Eastern-Orthodox—figured significantly in witchcraft accusations. Thus
witchcraft functioned as an aspect of Muscovite “xenophobia.”

The articles in the final section focus on folklore as the basis of many
elements of witchcraft beliefs, but they do not fall into the trap of attempting
to distinguish too sharply between “learned” and “popular” conceptions.
Ůlo Valk, for example, in his examination of Estonian trial records, which
he mines as a source of folkloric beliefs, carefully delineates the ways in which
common beliefs could inform official theology and demonology, and how
putatively “elite” demonological ideas could be appropriated and redeployed
by common people, evidenced by Estonian peasants’ “demonization” of
their German landlords. Similarly, while exploring the syncretic religious
world of a modern Bulgarian village, in which both priests and sorceresses
function as agents of divine power, Iveta Todorova-Pirgova stresses that there
is no point in distinguishing elements of “high” from “low” Christianity.

The volume ends with Mirjam Mencej summarizing her extensive anthrop-
ological field work examining contemporary witchcraft beliefs in eastern
Slovenia. She usefully distinguishes three categories of witch. The “neighbor-
hood witch” is typically identified by individuals who feel that she has
worked harm against them, mainly by curses or the evil eye, because of envy
or social discord. The “village witch” is also a known member of the com-

munity, to whom the village as a whole attributes a reputation for magical
powers, and who often is suspected of bringing more generalized harm to
the entire community, often by storms or hail. These two categories fre-
quently overlap. Quite distinct is the third category of “night witches.” Here,
villagers report visionary encounters at night, typically outside the safe con-
fines of the village, either with lights identified as witches or with actual
human figures. These encounters need not be harmful or malevolent in any
way, and these kinds of witches seem to have more in common with fairies
or other spirits, or with the wandering dead, than with actual (perceived)
maficent neighbors. Such conceptualizations need not map exactly onto
premodern witch beliefs, of course. Nevertheless, the clear similarities be-
tween both the malefic and more mythic variants of the witch that Mencej
identifies might well be of use to scholars attempting to discern how historical
ideas of witchcraft may have functioned.

MICHAEL D. BAILEY
Iowa State University