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Origins of the Witch Hunts

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Origins of the Witch Hunts

Abstract
The first true witch hunts began in western Europe in the early fifteenth century. The earliest series of trials took place in Italy and in French- and German-speaking regions around the western Alps. Of course, concern about harmful sorcery had deep roots in medieval Europe, and both officially sanctioned prosecution and popular persecution had been brought to bear on its supposed practitioners long before. But only in the fifteenth century did the full stereotype of diabolical witchcraft develop, which would endure throughout the period of the major witch hunts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

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

Comments
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In 1484, Pope Innocent VIII still had to forbid Duke Sigismund of Tyrol to allow ordeals in cases of witchcraft. The *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Hammer of Witches, 1486) mentioned that the ordeal of the red-hot iron was used in Fürstenberg in the Black Forest in 1485, when a woman suspected of sorcery offered herself for compurgation with a red-hot iron and thereby won her case. But Heinrich Kramer, the author of this famous manual, opposed this method of proof and explicitly preferred torture. The judge, however, should propose the possibility of an ordeal, because the witch usually would agree, certain to be protected against harm by her demon. Her willingness to undergo an ordeal would betray her all the more (*Malleus* 3.17f.). In order to eliminate any help from the Devil, another popular juridical manual, the *Layenspiegel* (1509) by Ulrich Tengler, similarly did not accept the ordeal for witches, and the same position could be found in many later juridical texts.

Nonetheless, from the second half of the sixteenth century onward, the swimming test seems to have been used quite frequently in several parts of Europe to discover witches. Oudewater in Holland was famous for its witch ordeal scales, seemingly a postmedieval invention: if an accused person was lighter than expected, he or she was declared guilty. However, other types of ordeal fell into disuse after the sixteenth-century Reformations.

Beyond Europe, in parts of Africa and Madagascar, the poison ordeal was and is applied often at the suspicion of sorcery. If the substance (made from the fruit of the tanghin-tree) given by the witch doctor to the suspected person causes vomiting, he is innocent, if it produces vertigo or trance, his guilt is considered proved.

**See also:** COURTS, SECULAR; INNOCENT VIII, POPE; KRAMER, HEINRICH; LAWS ON WITCHCRAFT (MEDIEVAL); LAYENSPIEGEL; *MALLEUS MALIFICARUM; SWIMMING TEST; TORTURE.  

**References and further reading:**


**Origins of the Witch Hunts**

The first true witch hunts began in western Europe in the early fifteenth century. The earliest series of trials took place in Italy and in French- and German-speaking regions around the western Alps. Of course, concern about harmful sorcery had deep roots in medieval Europe, and both officially sanctioned prosecution and popular persecution had been brought to bear on its supposed practitioners long before. But only in the fifteenth century did the full stereotype of diabolical witchcraft develop, which would endure throughout the period of the major witch hunts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Of particular importance for the ensuing hunts was the clear development, in the stereotype, of cultic and conspiratorial aspects of witchcraft. That is, witches were held to be members of organized groups engaging in a diabolically directed plot to undermine and destroy Christian communities and ultimately Christian civilization. Although individual trials for witchcraft might resemble earlier trials for harmful sorcery, full-fledged witch hunts were possible only after the notion that witches operated as part of an organized, conspiratorial cult began to become established. A hunt would develop out of a single trial or a relatively contained group of trials, either when authorities became convinced of the existence of large numbers of witches operating in a given area or when convicted witches would accuse, or be forced to accuse, others of membership in their sect. Ultimately, witch hunts arose due to the confluence of particular aspects of western European legal procedure, certain notions of demonic power and activity drawn from standard Christian demonology, and the widespread belief in the real efficacy of harmful magic or *malificium*.

Concern over harmful sorcery and official sanctions against such magic were longstanding in medieval Europe, and legislation against what were perceived to be malevolent forms of magic existed in classical antiquity as well. In Christian Europe, condemnation and attempts to repress such magic arose from two distinct traditions, the religious and the secular. From the earliest days of Christianity, clerical authorities were convinced that much, if not most, supposed magical activity in the world was actually the result of demonic forces. Magicians who claimed to manipulate natural, if occult, forces were suspected instead of invoking and supplicating demons. Early Church Fathers such as St. Augustine condemned the practice of supposedly
demonic magic as a serious crime against the Christian faith, and early Church legal codes condemned magic for this same reason. Throughout the Early Middle Ages, Christian penitentials, handbooks of penance used by priests in confession, contained condemnations of magic. The penalties prescribed for such practices, however, were by later standards relatively light. Christians who performed magic were to be made to recognize and confess their sins and do penance. In cases of extreme recalcitrance, excommunication might be required. Such penalties generally held force through the twelfth century. Thereafter, the Church’s greater concern over heresy and the perceived need to combat heretics more actively began to feed into an increasingly severe response to magic.

In addition to clerical concerns and ecclesiastical legislation against magic, there was also a substantial body of secular legislation in the early medieval period. By no means were secular concerns distinct from ecclesiastical ones. Lay rulers generally accepted the clerical association of magic with demonic invocation and attempted to enforce Christian morality in their legal codes. Nevertheless, in the most general sense, it can be said that, although clerical concerns focused on the supposedly demonic nature of much magic, secular legislation was more concerned with the harmful effects to which magic could supposedly be put. Secular law codes were therefore more narrowly concerned with the crime of maleficium, or harmful sorcery. Many of these law codes prescribed execution as a potential punishment in cases involving malevolent magic. Such condemnation stemmed both from traditional Germanic laws against harmful sorcery and from the relatively stringent late-imperial legal codes against magic and magicians. Despite the existence of such legislation, however, prosecutions for harmful magic remained limited throughout the early medieval period. A key factor was the use of accusatorial procedure in most European courts prior to the twelfth or thirteenth centuries.

Under accusatorial procedure, an aggrieved party would initiate a case by making an accusation of a crime. This person then also assumed the responsibility of proving the guilt of the person or persons accused. If the accused was judged innocent, however, then the accuser was subject to punishment. This procedure served to limit the number of entirely specious accusations. With crimes that supposedly involved the use of magic, which was secretive by its very nature, clear proof of guilt was often impossible to attain. In these cases, the accused might be forced to undergo a judicial ordeal. In theory, this practice placed the determination of guilt or innocence in the hands of God. In fact, the practice was highly subjective, and certainly no accuser could be sure of ultimate vindication by these means. In sum, aspects of accusatorial procedure tended to stifle the potential for widespread accusations of harmful sorcery and would have made difficult the sort of panic and chain-reaction accusations that typified later witch hunts. Beginning around the twelfth century, however, and continuing through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, European courts, both ecclesiastical and secular, increasingly moved away from accusatorial procedure and instead adopted inquisitorial procedure as their basic method of operation.

In contrast to accusatorial procedure, under inquisitorial procedure, the onus of proving guilt or innocence for a suspected crime fell on officials of the court rather than on the person who brought the initial accusation. In addition, the court could initiate an investigation or trial, even if no accusation of a crime had been made. In many ways, courts operating under inquisitorial procedure functioned in a more sophisticated way than those under accusatorial procedure in terms of the collection and evaluation of evidence. Yet in cases of suspected sorcery, still a highly secretive crime, visible evidence or eyewitnesses were almost always rare. In such cases, the best means of obtaining a conviction was through the confession of the suspected party. Because it was recognized that people would seldom willingly convict themselves of a serious crime, the use of torture was prescribed in order to extract the truth from suspects. Limitations and controls on the application of torture were established, but they could easily be ignored by overzealous magistrates eager for convictions. Especially in situations in which the nature of the crime aroused widespread anxiety or panic, as was the case with witch hunts, judicial controls on the use of torture were frequently set aside. Unrestricted torture allowed magistrates to extract confessions and to secure convictions for virtually any crime that they might suggest to the accused. The widespread use of inquisitorial procedure and of torture in the courts of western Europe therefore provided a necessary basis for the later functioning of witch hunts.

The existence of a legal and procedural basis alone, however, did not give rise directly to witch hunting. Rather, the basic level of concern over supposed magical activities had to increase among both religious and secular authorities, as did the conviction that practitioners of harmful sorcery were members of heretical and conspiratorial demonic cults. Initial signs of a new level of concern in these areas become evident in the early fourteenth century. The trial of Lady Alice Kytele of Kilkenny, Ireland, is often seen as a sort of proto-witch hunt from this period. Lady Alice had married a succession of wealthy men. Her first three husbands died under mysterious circumstances, and when her fourth husband began to sicken, she was accused of bewitching these men and then murdering them through sorcery. In 1324, Bishop Richard Ledrede took up the case, and ultimately Alice and a group of suspected accomplices were convicted not just of using harmful
Seemed to involve the invocation and worship of some form of heresy. In sorcery trials seems to have risen in the early fourteenth century, charges of harmful sorcery and the cultic worship of demons were being brought against relatively high-status defendants. Charges of the banishing of the Templars as a military and religious order. In actuality, the case was politically motivated. In 1307, officials of King Philip IV of France brought a range of charges against the Templars so that the royal government could seize the tremendous wealth and property controlled by the knights. Several key Templar leaders were arrested and questioned under severe torture. Ultimately, most confessed to a range of charges involving heretical beliefs and renunciation of the Christian faith, homosexual practices, and the worship of a demon in the figure of a head known as Baphomet. Succumbing to French pressure, Pope Clement V officially suppressed the order in 1312, and in 1314 the Templar grand master, Jacques de Molay, and other leaders were burned at the stake. Although charges of sorcery did not figure significantly in the trial of the Templars, the case nevertheless serves as an example of procedures that would later characterize witch hunts—extreme and unfounded accusations and false confessions secured through the use of torture (many Templars recanted their initial confessions, but this only exposed them to the charge of being relapsed heretics).

The cases of the Templars and of Alice Kyteler also revealed another important aspect of the rise of eventual witch hunts in western Europe, namely, that in the early fourteenth century, charges of harmful sorcery and the cultic worship of demons were being brought against relatively high-status defendants. Charges of the use of sorcery at princely courts occurred throughout the Middle Ages, but the number of clearly political sorcery trials seems to have risen in the early fourteenth century, thereby heightening concerns about the potential threat posed by harmful sorcery among powerful classes across Europe. Not even the papal court was immune. In 1258, Pope Alexander IV had ordered all papal inquisitors to refrain from involving themselves in cases of sorcery, unless the sorcery clearly entailed some form of heresy. In 1320, however, Pope John XXII, deeply concerned over matters of sorcery at least in part because he feared his own political enemies were using magic against him, ordered inquisitors to extend their investigations to include all matters of sorcery that seemed to involve the invocation and worship of demons, and in 1326 he formally excommunicated any Christian found guilty of practicing sorcery that involved invoking demons.

Concerns about the demonic, heretical, and ultimately cultic nature of much magical activity were rising among clerical authorities throughout the fourteenth century. In the early part of the century, the inquisitor Bernard Gui evinced a clear but still relatively slight concern over sorcery. In his inquisitorial handbook Praxia inquisitionis hereticorum pravitatis (The Practice of the Inquisition of Heretical Depravity), written around 1324, Gui devoted only a small section to a discussion of sorcery, and, although he considered sorcery to be an aspect of heresy, did not discuss the nature of heretical sorcery in detail. Fifty years later, however, the inquisitor Nicolas Eymeric, in his handbook Directorium inquisitorum (Directory of Inquisitors), written in 1376, presented an extended argument about the necessarily heretical nature of demonic magic. The very act of invoking a demon, Eymeric argued, constituted an act of worship even if no other overt signs of worship were present. Hence, all acts of demonic magic automatically entailed idolatry and therefore were evidence of heresy. Eymeric's arguments proved definitive for many clerical authorities who came after him and provided the basis for inquisitorial action against suspected sorcerers throughout the entire period of the witch hunts.

Once the practice of supposedly demonic magic was firmly established as entailing the worship of demons and thus as a form of heresy, it was perhaps natural that suspected practitioners of sorcery should have become suspected also of operating in organized cults just as other supposed heretical groups were thought to do. Throughout the later fourteenth century and on into the fifteenth, the number of trials for harmful sorcery rose significantly and critically, in the course of these trials, elements of diabolical heresy were grafted onto charges of simple maleficium. These elements of diabolism included the notion that witches were members of demonically organized cults that met secretly to feast, dance, and worship demons or the Devil. They also supposedly engaged in sexual orgies with each other, with demons, or with the Devil, and they performed a number of other horrific acts, such as murdering and eating babies or small children and desecrating the cross and the Eucharist.

The reasons for the rise in the number of trials during this period are uncertain. To some extent, the apparent rise may be a result of better survival of sources from this era. However, contemporary authorities clearly believed that sorcery and witchcraft were a growing threat in the world, which seems to have been reflected in an actual increase in the numbers of accusations and prosecutions. Many studies have revealed that accusations of witchcraft and witch hunts often originated in economic or social disruptions at the local
The earliest series of witchcraft trials and witch hunts took place in the early fifteenth century in regions of Italy; in Savoy and Dauphiné; in the territories of the Swiss cities of Bern, Fribourg, and Lucerne; and in the diocese of Lausanne and Sion (roughly the present Swiss cantons of Vaud and Valais). In many of these regions, witchcraft trials grew directly out of earlier trials of Waldensian heretics, and the mechanisms used by authorities to uncover and root out heretics were taken over and applied to witches as well. In particular, close cooperation between secular and ecclesiastical authorities seems to have typified many early witch hunts. At the same time, some of the first sources to describe the notion of cultic, conspiratorial witchcraft were being written in these regions. The Lucerne civic chronicler Hans Fründ described the supposed activities of a cult of witches in Valais in 1428. Around 1436, the French secular judge Claude Tholosan produced a treatise on witchcraft based on his experience conducting witchcraft trials in Dauphiné. Probably also in the middle of the decade, an anonymous clerical author, most likely an inquisitor, penned the Errores Gazariorum (Errors of the Gazaris or Gazarii; i.e., Cathars, a common term for heretics and later witches), describing the errors of that heretical sect of witches, and in 1437 and 1438, the Dominican theologian Johannes Nider wrote extensive accounts of witchcraft, largely based on trials conducted by the secular judge Peter of Bern in the Simme valley of the Bernese Oberland, a mountainous region south of the city. Nider collected many of his accounts of witchcraft while at the Council of Basel, a great ecumenical council of the Church that met from 1431 until 1449 in the city of Basel, just to the north of the regions where the greatest early witch-hunting activity took place. This council, which drew clerics from across Europe, served as a sort of clearinghouse for ideas and concerns about witchcraft and helped to spread the initially fairly localized concern over cults of witches and the dynamics of witch hunting to other regions of Europe. Once the idea of conspiratorial cults of witches became widely established across Europe, witch hunts could and did occur in almost every region of the Continent.

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See also: ACCUSATIONS; ACCUSATORIAL PROCEDURE; BAPHOMET; BASEL, COUNCIL OF; BERNARDINO OF SIENA; CHRONOLOGY OF WITCHCRAFT TRIALS; DAUPHINÉ, WITCHCRAFT TRIALS IN; ERRORES GAZARIORUM; EYMERIC, NICOLAS; FRÖND, HANS; GUI, BERNARD; HERESY; IDOLATRY; INQUISITION, MEDIEVAL; INQUISITORIAL PROCEDURE; ITALY; JOHN XXII, PAPES; KYTELER, ALICE; LAUSANNE, DIocese OF; LAWS ON WITCHCRAFT (MEDIEVAL); MOUNTAINS AND THE ORIGINS OF WITCHCRAFT; NIDER, JOHANNES; ORDEAL; PETER OF BERN; SAVOY, DUCHY OF; SWITZERLAND; TEMPLARS; THOLOSAN, CLAUDE; TORTURE; TRIALS; VALESI; VAUD, PAIS DE; VAUDÉS (WALDENSIANS); WITCH HUNTS.

References and further reading:


ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY

Nearly all early modern witchcraft trials occurred in European and American regions where Roman Catholicism or Protestant denominations prevailed; state- or church-sanctioned witchcraft trials were less frequent in Orthdox Church areas.

Orthodox churches are those Christian churches of the East and of eastern and southeastern Europe that accepted the primacy of Constantinople rather than Rome after the schism of the eleventh century. Slavic Orthodox churches, plus Moldavia and Wallachia, were founded by the missionary activity of the Greek Church from the ninth century onward. The Russian Church in Muscovy became the largest, and, after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, also the only substantial national Orthodox Church in an independent country. It was effectively autocephalous after its rejection of the reunion of the Orthodox churches with the Latin Western Church that had been agreed in a Decree of Union at the Council of Florence in 1439, but was thereafter largely repudiated in most Orthodox areas. The Russian Church elected a metropolitan of Moscow in 1448 without reference to Constantinople and established the Patriarchate of Moscow in 1589.

The establishment of the Russian and southeastern European Orthodox churches was accompanied by other external cultural influences from Byzantium, including the magical and divinatory beliefs and practices that were a notable feature of Byzantine popular culture but excluding, for the most part, the intellectual interest in magic of such Byzantine philosophers as Michael Psellus (1018–ca. 1078). At the level of popular belief, Orthodox Christians had a good deal in common with Latin Christians, although the details of indigenous pagan survival differed. Literary evidence suggests that both in Byzantium and Russia, magic was usually regarded as demonic, and the notion of the pact with the Devil was familiar. At a more official level, the teaching of the Orthodox Church before the schism with Rome was essentially the same in matters of witchcraft and magic as that of the Latin Church.

Insofar as there was an official attitude, it derived from the opinions of the early Church Fathers and acts of the various early councils and synods, which tended to equate witchcraft with paganism. Reflecting the ambivalence of Jewish attitudes toward magic, divination, and witchcraft expressed in Scripture, the Church Fathers were not unanimous concerning the reality of witchcraft. Jewish views ranged from the outright condemnation of Exodus 22:18 (22:17; "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live") and the "abominations" listed in Deuteronomy 18:10–14 to the frequent references to magical practices and belief in their efficacy. Patristic opinion did, however, agree in condemning magical practices and was supported in this by the tradition of Roman law. Among the early theologians who did appear to believe in the reality of witchcraft, St. Augustine of Hippo, with his extensive knowledge of the magic as well as the philosophy of the ancient world, did most to elaborate a theological view; but as a Latin, his writings had less influence in the East (where he was sometimes regarded with suspicion) than in the West. Augustine's works were unknown in Russia until relatively modern times.

The teaching of the early Church relating to magic and witchcraft, often found as condemnations in patristic sources (e.g., St. Basil and St. John Chrysostom) or expressed as prohibitions (especially to the clergy) in early collections of ecclesiastical law, was summarized at Constantinople in the acts of the Trullan Synod (692), which formalized the work of the fifth and sixth ecumenical councils (Constantinople II and III) but was later rejected by the Latin Church. This synod regulated marriage and sexual behavior. It also forbade association with Jews; mixed bathing; attending horse races, minces, or animal shows; theatrical dancing; consulting diviners, sorcerers, cloud-chasers, or purveyors of amulets; celebrating the Calends, Vota, and Brumalia (Greek festivals in honor of Pan and Dionysius); wearing comic, satiric, or tragic masks; or jumping over fires at the beginning of the month. One cannot be sure how far this list represented genuine current concerns, but