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Bernard Gui

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Abstract

Perhaps the most famous of all medieval inquisitors, and certainly one of the most important and influential, Bernard Gui is best known for his monumental inquisitor's handbook, *Practica inquisitionis heretice pravitatis* (The Practice of the Inquisition of Heretical Depravity), written around 1324. Although he never described anything like the full stereotype of witchcraft as it would appear in later centuries, he did include in this work several sections dealing with learned demonic magic, or necromancy, as well as more evidently popular forms of sorcery. The *Practica inquisitionis* became one of the most widely read of all medieval inquisitorial manuals, second only to the later *Directorium inquisitorum* (Directory of Inquisitors) of the Catalan inquisitor Nicolas Eymeric. Gui's descriptions of sorcery thus seem very important, particularly in terms of shaping later clerical, and especially inquisitorial, thought on this subject.

Disciplines

European History | History of Religion | Medieval History

Comments

Encyclopedia of Witchcraft: The Western Tradition edited by Richard M. Golden. Copyright 2006 by ABC-CLIO. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission of ABC-CLIO, LLC, Santa Barbara, CA.

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GUI, BERNARD (CA. 1261–1331)

Perhaps the most famous of all medieval inquisitors, and certainly one of the most important and influential, Bernard Gui is best known for his monumental inquisitor's handbook, *Practica inquisitionis heretice pravitatis* (The Practice of the Inquisition of Heretical Depravity), written around 1324. Although he never described anything like the full stereotype of witchcraft as it would appear in later centuries, he did include in this work several sections dealing with learned demonic magic, or necromancy, as well as more evidently popular forms of sorcery. The *Practica inquisitionis* became one of the most widely read of all medieval inquisitorial manuals, second only to the later *Directorium inquisitorum* (Directory of Inquisitors) of the Catalan inquisitor Nicolas Eymeric. Gui's descriptions of sorcery thus seem very important, particularly in terms of shaping later clerical, and especially inquisitorial, thought on this subject.

Born in southern France around 1261, Gui entered the Dominican order and studied theology both at Montpellier and Paris. In 1307, he was appointed inquisitor of Toulouse, and served in this office until 1323 or 1324. From 1324 until his death in 1331, he was bishop of Lodève. Throughout his life, Gui was active in the administration of the Dominican order as a theologian, and also as a historian. Yet it was as an inquisitor that he achieved his greatest influence, mainly through his *Practica inquisitionis*. Intended as a practical handbook to guide inquisitors in the conduct of their office, this work covered all major forms of heresy existent, or thought to be existent, in Gui's time, outlining heretical beliefs and practices, offering guidelines to be used in questioning, and proposing formulas for the conviction and sentencing of heretics. Within this large work, only a few brief sections were actually devoted to sorcery, divination, and demonic invocation.

During his tenure as inquisitor of Toulouse, Gui seems never to have tried a case of heretical sorcery personally. Nevertheless, during this period sorcery was increasingly becoming a matter of inquisitorial concern. In 1320, Pope John XXII had specifically ordered the inquisitors of Toulouse and Carcassonne to take action against any sorcerers who offered sacrifices to demons or otherwise worshiped or adored them. In all likelihood, the type of magic that worried Pope John XXII was learned demonic magic, or necromancy. This sort of magic involved complex and often quasireligious invocations of demons. It was above all a clerical form

of magic with which many people at the papal court at Avignon would have been familiar. Judging from the material in the *Practica inquisitionis*, this was also the form of magic that most concerned Bernard Gui. His most extensive sections on sorcery and demonic invocation contained formulas for the abjuration and degradation of clerics found guilty of performing superstitious or sorcerous acts, often involving misuse of the Eucharist or of baptized images and figures. He also described in detail a complex necromantic ceremony as it was supposedly performed by a clerical sorcerer, involving wax images, blood rituals, and explicit sacrifice to demons.

In other sections of the *Practica inquisitionis*, however, Gui described a different form of sorcery, involving less complex rites and more commonplace material and devices. Here sorcerers worked through simple incantations, herbs, and bodily items such as hair and nails. According to Gui, these people sought to cure disease, detect thieves, recover lost items, arouse love, and restore fertility between couples. In short, his accounts here seem clearly to reflect common or popular magical practices that might actually have been in fairly widespread use in the region of Toulouse in the early fourteenth century. His descriptions of the practices contained virtually no hints of the demonic invocation and diabolism that had been so evident in his sections on clerical sorcerers. Nevertheless, he was explicit in his conviction that these simpler practices were also necessarily demonic in nature. Indeed, it was the element of demonic invocation that allowed inquisitors to bring charges of heresy against these people. Thus Gui serves as a particularly good example of how the clerical conviction in the demonic nature of almost all magic, suited mainly to ecclesiastical authorities' understanding of learned necromancy, was transferred to the simpler practices of popular or common sorcery. Although Gui never described witchcraft in the full sense, this conviction on the part of clerical authorities, and learned secular authorities as well, came to play an important part in sustaining the witch hunts of future centuries.

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See also: DOMINICAN ORDER; EYMERIC, NICOLAS; INQUISITION, MEDIEVAL; INVOCATIONS; JOHN XXII, POPE; MAGIC, LEARNED; MAGIC, POPULAR; NECROMANCY; SORcery.

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