

The European Witch-Craze: A Historiography

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Between 1400-1750, Europe saw a major shift in political, religious, social and cultural ideas. Religious turmoil had embroiled much of Europe with upheavals like the Protestant Reformation, and Catholic Counter-Reformation. This occurred during frightening natural

events, like the Little Ice Age of Europe, that occurred between 1300-1850, leaving many areas devastated by things like famine, and drought. In the mid-1300's a massive plague killed between seventy-five-million to two-hundred-million Europeans. Stressors of the era gave rise to another, major phenomenon, the European Witch-Craze.

Scholarly estimates postulate that between one-hundred-thousand, and nine-million people were tried, and executed for the crime of witchcraft. Until the 1920's the so-called "European Witch-Craze" was limited in scholarly interest. Margaret Murray in 1921 cultivated an interest in the craze that occurred with her published work *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, and followed up by *God of the Witches* in 1931. Murray's work created the Witch-cult Hypothesis. She hypothesized that those accused of witchcraft were part of a fertility cult, which they worshipped a fertility god.¹ According to Murray the fertility god, and the devil later associated with witchcraft, were the same.

Murray's later reputation has been tarnished by scholars of the genre, but her work was important for stirring an interest in an otherwise unusual subject in the study of history. Later scholarship did find some merit in Murray's work, and some of her ideas have become central tenets of witch-craze study. Her study of group rituals has aligned with later history as nearly all historians agree that learned ideas of witchcraft, from the time period, believe that witches met in groups. These nocturnal meetings, known as a *Sabbath*, or a *Sabbat* was associated with those accused. The pact with a god, made a part of the study by Murray, was another area widely accepted by scholars. This pact, while not with a god, but with the devil himself, was

¹ Margaret Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe: A Study in Anthropology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921), 28-46.

central to witchcraft beliefs during the trials. Most witch-craze scholars do point to Murray's work as the inspiration for later study into this, however they completely negate any notion of a fertility cult.

The area of study stayed somewhat stagnant, until 1969 when Intellectual Historian Hugh Trevor-Roper published a collection of articles titled *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries and Other Essays*. His book established popular usage of the term "Witch-Craze". His work was followed by a book written by Welsh historian Keith Thomas, published in 1971, titled *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. Trevor-Roper's infamous work in the field was central to the foundation of this area of historiography. Thomas' book that followed was focused on England, and their place in the Witch-Craze. Using an anthropological approach Thomas, in his massive 740-page book, examined wider trends in English society, starting with religious beliefs. As he carries on, he notes the wider acceptance of magic, and superstitious belief within English society as a whole, and even noting the use of professionals, of whom wield magic². Thomas' approach, in which the beliefs about witchcraft involved society as a whole, was later challenged by many historians who objected to his broad approach.³⁴ Despite the controversy over his methods, his work would influence later anthropological studies on the subject.

Richard Horsley, in 1979, published a response to the work by Thomas. His article, titled "Who Were the Witches? The Social Roles of the Accused in the European Witch Trials", sought

² Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 212-245.

³ Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches Sabbath* (New York: Pantheon, 1991), 2.

⁴ Richard Horsley, "Who Were the Witches? The Social Roles of the Accused in the European Witch Trials," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 9, no. 4 (Spring 1979); 690-691.

to examine the roles that the accused played in European society. He argued that other historians view the witch-craze as an attack on, what Europeans at the time, what people of the time believed to be actual witches. He argues that this idea doesn't give room to examine the actual victims of accusations.⁵ This standard idea as to what a witch was, came from the learned elite, and not from common Europeans. It was essential, in order to properly understand the causes, to differentiate the beliefs of the common Europeans, and the beliefs of the educated, ruling classes.

Earlier historians, like Thomas, speculated that the persecuted witches were seen as wizards, or conjurers within a society, striving to harm. He did extensive research, by using the extensive court records available Lucerne, Switzerland to make a table of those accused. The people taken to trial were often, within their society, used for their beneficial magic, known as Beneficent magic. These people were commonly known as "cunning-folk" in their society, and he found they played a role in their towns as mystics and healers, and few of the accusations were for dark magic. Four cases of the extensive trial records were for harmful, weather magic, in the form of hail storms.⁶ He believes that accusations often came from other cunning-folk, perhaps as a tool to rid the town of any competition.⁷

In 1984, Christina Larner made her contribution to the historiography with a work titled *Witchcraft and Religion*. Her short work, of just 190 pages, was published one year after her untimely death, which also happened to be the same year she was given a professorship at the University of Glasgow. Larner was critical of Thomas and his belief that widespread, common

⁵ Horsley, "Who Were the Witches? The Social Roles of the Accused in European Witch Trials," 691.

⁶ Ibid, 707.

⁷ Ibid, 704.

belief in magic, and superstition created the basis for a witch craze. To Larner, an approach like Thomases limited the scope of study, and instead she sought to focus her efforts down to the village level. Her study was set in Scotland, beginning in 1566 with the birth of King James VI, and follows through to the end of the craze in the 1750's. Scotland was an area hit particularly hard by the witch-craze, and Larner sought to examine court records of the era in order to discern the true cause of the hysteria. Her overall thesis is that the witch-craze did not originate from village, but from the legal framework that allowed the craze to fester.

Her evidence for an educated infiltration into commoner life, begins with an overview of the intellectual life of James VI. Through this she finds that a visit to mainland Europe by James VI in 1590, exposed him to popular demonology, and upon returning to England, and Scotland he wrote a popular treatise that sparked a craze there.⁸ In her second chapter, where she gives an overview of the Scottish contribution to the craze, she continues on to write of the legal grounds to persecute witchcraft, including means of torture.⁹ This, along with Calvinism, in which Scottish citizens believed in spiritual attacks on earth, served as scaffolding necessary to start trials. King James VI treatise was also proof that the learned elite had combined their ideas with those of the commoners, thus creating a fear of witchcraft. Larner made a controversial attack on the idea of witch-hunting as "women-hunting", believing that the focus on women-hunting narrowed the scope for historians. She did note that 80% of victims were women, but she did not believe that witchcraft was exclusive to the female sex, but tended to be related to the sex of women.

⁸ Christina Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief* (New York: Blackwell, 1984), 5.

⁹ Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion*, 31.

Joseph Klaits, in 1985, sought to understand the victims of the witch craze, as well as overall European trends, in his book *Servants of Satan: The Age of the Witch Hunts*. This book looked into the accused and took notice that many of the victims were representatives of ostracized groups. His book is set between the years of 1560 and 1700, and his large study covers all of Europe. The ostracized groups he examines, people like heretics, homosexuals, Jews, lepers and witches were all victims of discrimination, as an excuse to rid various regions of disagreeable types. He sets the need for a sacrificial scapegoat against the backdrop of European turmoil, and reformation thinking.¹⁰ Klaits book offered the basis for many later historians, as his work covered a general overview of the European Witch-Craze. Like Larner, he agrees that the witchcraft trials were preceded by the legal framework necessary to persecute.

According to Klaits, the violent persecution of societies others came out of the Medieval age. Events, like the Crusades, turned society against outsiders, like Muslims, and Jews.¹¹ Religious fervor penetrated deep within European society, and out of the Protestant Reformation came the rise of spiritual threats. From this, two poles of experience came forth, one evil, perpetrated by the devil, and the other good, curated by God.¹² This genuine fear of satanic influence gave rise to fears, in which worldly groups were working as conduits for the darkness, thus giving rise to witch beliefs. Books like Institoris' *Malleus Maleficarum*, a Christian treatise on witchcraft, and witch-hunting. This book was integral to validating the witch-craze, as the elites within society gave legitimacy to the cause. The rest of Klaits work gives a

¹⁰ Joseph Klaits, *Servants of Satan: The Age of the Witch Hunts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 4-5.

¹¹ Klaits, *Servants of Satan*, 20.

¹² Ibid, 22.

commonly accepted overview of European struggles, and growing anxieties that led to witch persecution.

As the *Sabbath or Sabbat*, was central to the witch accusations, Carlo Ginzburg, in *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches Sabbath*, published in 1991, sought to give depth to this area of witch beliefs. He disagreed with Trevor-Roper's analysis that the witch-craze was just an oddity of the time, and that the metaphysical beliefs of the common person gave rise to the witch craze. Ginzburg put forth the belief that the ideas of the common person could not have any validity in the hunt for witches, without articulation from those who were learned. The learned members of society generally came from religious institutions, and their work, especially on treatises were the key factor in the growing craze. In a similar vein to Klaitz, he examined the outsiders of society, and concurred that Jews, lepers, heretics and witches were the expendable members of society.

While he agrees that the accused were the outsiders, he spent the remainder of his work trying to understand the origins of the *Sabbath*. Margaret Murray's claim of a fertility cult was negated by Ginzburg, and in its place he believed that shamanistic beliefs of ancient Europe stood as the foundation of witchcraft. He used extensive evidence in his work, albeit fragmentary evidence, and through this he pieced together a theory. Ginzburg wrote that shamanistic beliefs are implicit in material dating back, all the way to the days of the Scythians, a nation of people, who existed in the Caucasus region between 700 BC to 300 BC. Studying Greek literature, he notes that stories came from the Scythian region of women ruled over by female deities, who during ritual practice would shift into animals, and would enter the realm

of the dead.¹³ From the Scythians, the shamanist beliefs spread outward to the Celtic, and Slavic people of the ancient world.¹⁴ This dense work, pieced together using conjecture, derived from partial evidence, rings more similar to the work of Margaret Murray than later witch-craze historians.

The same year as Ginzburg's study, 1991, Gregory Annabel published an article in *Past & Present*, titled "Witchcraft, Politics and 'Good Neighbourhood' in Early Seventeenth Century Rye" examining the local level politics that led to a witch-hunt in England. Rye, a town in Sussex, has a vast wealth of source material, and he set his study between 1550-1650. Over twenty-thousand words of information, available largely from court records, showed that many of those accused in Rye were outsiders within their neighborhoods. Much of his work traces a story, about a woman who he described as one of the cunning-folk, who practiced magic. This woman, Anne, had moved into Sussex recently after losing a family farm, upon the death of her father. Rye faced political turmoil during a time in the brewers, and butchers in town were fighting for political power.¹⁵ As the butcher's power began to wane, Anne's father, a butcher, passed away and she was thus forced to rent a home in town where she was viewed as an outsider. This occurred during a time in Rye when the town was suffering financially, giving way to anxiety about a source of the issue. The brewers who were the town leaders likely saw Anne's spiritual abilities as a threat, and sought to accuse her of witchcraft. As common throughout history, the use of fear was integral to maintaining control and the fears of

¹³ Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches Sabbath* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), 89-122.

¹⁴ Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 207-212.

¹⁵ Gregory Annabel, "Witchcraft, Politics and 'Good Neighbourhood' in Early Seventeenth-Century Rye," *Past & Present*, no. 133 (November 1991); 44.

witchcraft allowed for the leaders to stand in as the experts in curing the town of witchcraft.

According to Annabel, this factionalism was what drove the witch-craze in Rye, and should incite curiosity for those examining the wider theme of the witch-craze.¹⁶

The greater conversation about the involvement of women in the witch-craze was published in *Past & Present* in 1993 by Clive Holmes. His article titled "Women, Witnesses and Witches" looked witch trials in England between the 16th and 17th centuries. His study is an examination into the question about women, especially in response to Lerner's idea that women should not be the sole focus of the witch-craze literature. Holmes major project was not only to examine women as victims, but women's role in the witch-craze overall. Not only were women accused of being witches, but they were generally the victims, and accuser of witchcraft. In just 27% of all cases examined it was found that men brought the accusations.¹⁷ Common in many cases, the accusers claimed they were possessed, had seen a physical mark of the devil on a woman's body, or were victim of women's powers. Holmes looks into the social roles of women in the society of the Early-Modern Period, and noted that women often engaged in rivalries with one-another and any struggles in life were easily blamed on the acts of others. The accusations brought by women were further used to verify the male-dominated clergy and legal arena of which the trials occurred.

Intellectual history of the witch-craze was truly established by an intuitive 1997 work by Stuart Clark. Clark's book is often seen as a groundbreaking study into the witch-craze and is one of the most cited sources among the modern scholarship of this area of study. Clark's book is a

¹⁶ Annabel, "Witchcraft, Politics and ' Good Neighbourhood'", 55.

¹⁷ Clive Holmes, " Women: Witnesses and Witches," *Past & Present* 140, no.1 (August 1993); 27.

massive 700-page study of the intellectual foundations of witchcraft, studying European elite thought between the 15th and 17th centuries. Understanding the importance of the elite ideology in establishing the basis for the witch-craze he delves into five categories of study: language, science, history, religion and politics. Through the study of language, he creates the notion that thinkers of the Reformation era used polarized thinking to understand their world.¹⁸ The idea of the witch represented the polar opposite of the sacred things in Christian life. The women aspect of a witch fit in with this inverted idea, as in a male dominated society, the polar-opposite was always women. Through the study of demonology Clark derives this premise, as the things that leaders could not understand were given the label of demonic, or the opposite of God's work.

His later chapters further examined the intellectual foundations. In Science he understands that even the most learned scientists of the day believed that natural causes of the world were influenced by demons, and the devil. Religion examines the Reformation period, and this attempt at evangelical Christianity meant that the Christian leaders had to pacify common beliefs about everyday magic, and superstition. This meant attacks on both the experts in good magic, as much as attacks on the bad.¹⁹ Clark's book is an incredible look at nearly every area of witchcraft belief, and his work is deeply researched, and put to the test of logic. To construct his argument, he uses any available sources of available from the Early-Modern Period, focusing on religious, and witchcraft treatises. His work is a deep look at the evolution of human thought

¹⁸ Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: In Idea of Witchcraft in Early-Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 72-79.

¹⁹ Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, 467-469.

and not only serves to aid in the understanding of witchcraft, but to understand Early-Modern thought.

Julian Goodare, in 1998, looked shift the conversation about the witch-craze, and the effect the witch-craze had on the behavior of women. The focus of his article “Women and the Witch-Hunt in Scotland” focuses on a region hit particularly hard by not only the witch-craze, but by social and political upheaval. These issues played into the sentiments about witch-craft. Much of his article is set constructing the background of the ensuing trials. Through these issues, he believes that the witch-trials were pushed forward as a front to try and control women. His study begins with the background to the trials. The Kirk Sessions, courts held by the Scottish Catholic Church, sought to enforce and godliness, and punished any moral lapse. Scottish women faced an economic crisis as during the first half of the 17th century, the era in which Goodare’s study is set, nearly 20% of all young-men in Scotland migrated out of the country. Many of these young men served as mercenaries in Europe, often never returning.²⁰ This left a large percentage of poor marginalized women.

The number of poor women in Scotland increased, creating an era of panic that coincided with the witch-hunts. He used parliament records, and church records to understand the feelings towards women at this time, and many leaders noted the threat they exerted on control of the society. The era in which the number of poor women grew happened during a time in which there was great resistance to authority in Scotland. Poor personal decisions were thought to be degrading society, especially those believed to be sexually deviant. This fear of sexual deviance having drastic repercussions on society, along with a fear of elderly women, who were often

²⁰ Julian Goodare, “Women and the witch-hunt in Scotland,” *Social History* 23, no. 3 (1998), 292.

seen as burdensome and unfriendly, Goodare believes that the witch-trials occurred in order to make an example. While punishing witches was part of the process, the major purpose was to pressure women to live by a certain standard, while targeting women specifically.

In 2003, University of North Carolina professor, Hans Broedel looked to expound on the importance of the witch treatise in the foundation of witch-craze beliefs. He covered, extensively, a book he thought was the most important work of the witch-hunting books, the *Malleus Maleficarum*. The parameters of his book *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft: Theology and Popular Belief*, is set between 1430-1500, and focuses on the witch-hunters and Dominican priests Heinrich Institoris and Jacob Sprenger. Heinrich Institoris, known as Heinrich Kramer, wrote the *Malleus Maleficarum*, a book of immense importance to the witch-craze. The witch-hunting treatise established, in the words of the educated, elite members of society, all the central tenets of witchcraft. This included the *Sabbat*, and a sexual pact with the devil, in which they were granted supernatural powers. Kramer's treatise focused on maleficent magic in order to prove of the evilness of witchcraft. Broedel's work digs deeply into the formation of the witchcraft beliefs. The *Malleus* was the preeminent witch-hunting book of the Inquisition period, and its formation was needed in order to create a framework for witch-hunting. The first thirty-pages of his book outline the formation of Sprenger, and Kramer's witchcraft treatise. Most of the information the writers of the *Malleus* gathered came from their own experience hunting witches. Using torture techniques of the Inquisition, the two men would ask leading questions until each witch admitted to the crimes they were expecting. This gave the two men a sample size, mainly of

women, who met their criteria.²¹ Broedel's book is heavily researched using the scholarly sources of the Early-Modern Period, and some sources dating back to the works of Thomas Aquinas. Through studying the writing of the writers of the treatise, and other witch-hunters of the era, he carefully constructed an origin for the infamous manual. His overall focus is examining how the book found its intellectual origins, and the extent by which it outlasted all other texts that preceded it.

Brian Levack's 2006, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, sought to examine what defined witchcraft, during the years of the witch-craze. His book looked into the factors that caused the witch-craze, in Europe, and looked into the intellectual foundations of witchcraft that allowed the craze to move forward.²² Levack noted that a legal framework was necessary to create grounds for the systematic hunting of witches.²³ The social, and cultural background of the era was of equal importance, as the Protestant Reformation was a necessary backdrop in order for fears of witchcraft to occur. The Reformation thinking gave Europeans at the time a fear of demonic influence in worldly affairs, thus making a fear of witchcraft, a true threat.

During a dark era for Europeans, local villagers and city-dwellers suffered from a paranoia about evil influences on Earth, and the witch-craze gave them an opportunity to rid themselves of enemies. The Inquisition, and its use of torture techniques made this outlet possible, as this was necessary for any admissions of guilt to occur, as well as any later executions. His study, encompasses the entirety of the craze, 1450-1750, and takes place throughout all of Europe.

²¹ Hans Peter Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft: Theology and Belief* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 20013), 15-16.

²² Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 2.

²³ Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 75.

This wide setting allows him to state that over those ensuing centuries, tensions and fears about witchcraft grew, allowing for the hysteria to envelope much of Europe. His book has been central to later works on the subject of the European Witch-Craze, as his overview simplified the intellectual origins of the subject.

Lyndal Roper, one year later in 2004, switched the focus of the witch-craze onto Germany in her book *Witch Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany*. Like Levack, and most earlier scholars, she believes that the legal framework that was established in the Early-Modern Period was essential to the foundation of witch trials. She further believes that Reformation thinking created a fear of demonic influence. The rest of her book, however is dedicated to the study of women, and their place in the witch-craze that occurred in Germany. She looked to question why women were the major victims of the witch craze. Germany was hit especially hard by the hysteria of the craze, and women were the major target, especially older women. She, in agreement with Broedel, writes that the establishment of popular treatises, like *The Malleus Maleficarum* gave the intellectual foundations necessary to justify a witch hunt.²⁴

Looking at legal records, and any other primary source material available at the local German level, she studied the persecution of women between 1500-1700, beginning just years after Institoris and Sprenger wrote their infamous book. The major accusations were sexual relations with the devil, cannibalism, mainly infant cannibalism, and maleficent attacks. The women were believed to have been a part of a nightly *Sabbat* attended by both elderly, and young women, the young often serving as recruits. The infant cannibalism, she believes, was a common accusation as it was a blatant mockery of the Christian communion. The attacks on women had

²⁴ Lyndal Roper, *Witch Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany* (New York: Yale University Press, 2004), 38.

to deal with the social state of Germany at the time. The nation was experiencing harsh climate conditions, such as famine and drought, alongside a population decline. Infant mortality, and child mortality was often blamed on the women watching the children, usually an older woman in the town, or city. Older women were also targeted as they were seen as a burden on society during times of struggle, and the provisions were needed to give to child-bearing women. The Inquisition interrogators would ask leading questions while torturing the women in question. These women, desperate for mercy, would often name other women in the village, simply to get the torture to stop. Roper's work was extremely well-researched, examining myths, and popular beliefs alongside the works of the educated classes.

The historiography of the European Witch-Craze has seen a major shift since its inception. Margaret Murray's original work, detailing the fertility cult, was later debunked, but created a need for historical discourse on an otherwise obscure subject. The later writers examined the causes of the witch-craze, often noting the upheaval politically, socially and culturally in Europe at the time. Different regions, and localities have been examined, each often exhibiting different behaviors, including the number of trials, the make-up of those accused, and the background. A rich part of the historiography has been a deep look into the intellectual origins, notably with names like Clark, Broedel, Levack and Roper. The witch-craze historiography also offers a study in the lives of women, common Europeans, the educated Europeans, religious history, cultural history and social history. It is a rich, constantly evolving area of academic study.

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