

THE ERA OF EARLY MODERN WITCH HUNTS IN EUROPE

A short overview – Time, Place, Numbers and Gender

Midgard Viking Centre

Midgard Talks 2024, Wednesday 14th August, 11 am

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It is the entertainment-based magic that make up our western contemporary view of sorcerers and witches. Such powerful icons of entertainment excite our imagination about the mystical, uncanny, hidden, occult and unknown. We find the characters in the classic folktales, in our celebration of Halloween, with costumes and witch masks, in Disney's portrayal of *Magica de Spell* and *Madam Mim*, in modern tales as the ones by Roald Dahl. Sorcery, magic and witches play important roles in blockbusters like *Game of Thrones*, *Lord of the Rings*, and, finally, in the story about Harry Potter and the vast magic universe in that series.

When we use the witch concept today, we are talking about the people who were historically labeled as witches during the witch trials, but also about the witch as a mythical figure, and the witch as a feminist symbol. The contemporary tendency is to change the roles when it comes to the meaning of witch-beliefs and the figure of the witch.

Just to mention one example: The three girls in the Norwegian black metal band *Witch Club Satan* released their self-titled debut album on the record label *Lost and Found* on The International Women's Day, March 8, 2024. Several of the compositions draw their inspiration from Norwegian witchcraft cases during the 17th Century, such as in the song *Steilneset* and *Hex*. The three girls identify themselves with historical witches linked to the girls' home in Porsgrunn, Fredrikstad and Andenes.

My speech today at Midgard Talks 2024, on the other hand, deals with the era of witch hunts in Europe, through a period where witchcraft and sorcery were looked upon as the worst offenses in society. Crime connected to witchcraft was so serious that European countries, included Norway,

launched into legal persecutions where the criminals, mostly women, were defeated through torture and fire.

The Witches

The witches still fly in today's entertainment industry, as rather harmless products of our fantasies. But this image lays heavily on the shoulders of a long tradition of oppression, stigma, persecution, miscarriage of justice, murder and ridicule. Historically, sorcerers and witches are labels for people which were brutally interrogated, tortured and burned at the stake, for what most of us today would think of as impossible behavior. We can speak of a long tradition of comedy and tragedy - a story that moves between innocent, fascinating entertainment and ice-cold brutality. Even though Europe stopped burning witches centuries ago, this kind of persecution still goes on in many non-western countries today.

The witch-figure has changed several times on its long and wild journey through Western history. Every time the image of the witch has taken on a new form, it has had consequences for women and girls in real life. The character becomes a female role model, often as a frightening example of cunning female evil. «The witches» tells the tale of what can happen if women are not subdued by strong patriarchic discipline, but instead go against traditional family values. The idea of the evil witch has always been used as a constant warning against women who choose to go their own way. The unruly and rebellious woman who is burned at the stake, is an image always there in the background. The cliché about the old, ugly and lonely woman with a long, crooked nose and a black cat lurking suspiciously around, is also a part of this kind of misogyny. Throughout history, the witch figure has been the most well-known of all negative female stereotypes.

Witches in the Middle Ages

During the Middle Ages, most of the theologians and canonists had a negative, but relaxed, relationship to magic. In some cases, the magician could receive punishment for his or her business, but mostly they were able to go about their art without any official intervention. In legal matters, they went the opposite way. People risked penalty for believing in witches! Canon law, as it was designed through *Canon Episcopi* from the early 10th century, gained much authority as ecclesiastical law in the European Middle Ages. Here, the belief in witches was described as illusions, visions and dreams. The notion of women's nightly rides through the air together with the goddess Diana were rejected as fantasy.

Pope Gregor VII wrote to King Harald Hen of Denmark in year 1080, complaining about the Danish executing women because they had created storms and epidemics. Orders from Rome made it very clear that Danish King was to teach his subordinates how such disasters only came from God. God's wrath, in the form of storms and diseases, should be fought with a pious way of life, hymns and prayers of absolution.

Malleus Maleficarum - The Hammer of Witches

The rather relaxed attitude of the Church in the Middle Ages would change radically through the 15th century. The Renaissance period led to a huge rise in the interest in magic and occultism. At the same time, a new perception of witchcraft gradually developed in the scholarly culture and at European universities. The notion that all kind of magic was a sign of a connection to Satan, would inform the ideas and actions for the next few centuries.

The Renaissance text *Malleus Maleficarum*, or *the Hammer of Witches* as it is known in English, first published in 1486, became an epochal study of witch-crime. The introduction in this blood dripping text has got an authoritative bull from Pope Innocent VIII, where the papacy gives it consent to the persecution of this new crime of witchcraft. Because of the new art of book printing, the text was widely spread and was printed in several editions. According to the author, the German Dominican friar *Heinrich Kramer* (c 1430-1505), the witches are, first and foremost, women. These women have made a voluntary pact with Satan and receive magical force through their intimate relationship to demons. Witchcraft is defined by the combination of evil deeds and intentional bodily contact between women and demons. Kramer writes that these illegal acts started early in the 15th century, when modern European women no longer would resist the demons' sexual approaches. Because demons gave women better orgasms than ordinary men, the prevalence of witchcraft continued to grow even faster through the century. Kramer even writes that there was a population explosion of witches from the early 15th century and onwards. As an eager inquisitor himself, Kramer sent dozens of women to the fire during his «witch mission» in some of the German states. Witchcraft had suddenly become the new super-crime in Europe, with the perception of the diabolical woman who had contact with Satan's empire as the main image.

The author of *the Hammer of the Witches* himself experienced several attacks from evil women. They came as uninvited guests during the night in the shapes of troublesome dogs and goats. They stabbed needles through Kramer's pillow while he was sleeping, and this led to agonizing

headaches when he woke up. It was only his strong faith in God that stopped the witches in doing even more harm. For us, it is hard not to suspect that some hard-hitting «alcohol demons» also had been working their magic here.

The large European witch-hunt

During the 16th century the intellectual teachings on witches, demonology, gained stronger impact. The belief in witches has its heyday, and the persecutions spread. The scholarly experts drew a darker and even more sinister picture of all types of witch-activities than what we know from the century before. From the end of the 16th century, the sorcerers are more dangerous and aggressive than before. It is not only individuals who enters a pact with the devil anymore, but huge groups of people. Witchcraft had become a big conspiracy and a super-crime against the holy Christian society. The witches got the label as the primary enemy of society because of the idea that this was a kind an hidden organized, collective crime. They were fifth columnists, saboteurs, collaborators and secret agents in Satan's service - a Satan that had risen from his narrow, deep darkness and had become ever more vital and presumptuous. During the last days before doomsday, Satan and his demons were out amongst people to enlist recruits. Fear of doomsday and fear of the devil mutually reinforced each other.

Many countries in Europe approved of strict laws to defeat the vast witch threat. The most intense period for legal persecution of witches in Europe starts around 1560, and lasts a bit into the 1600, with outbreaks of large persecutions both before and after this core period. In Europe, around 45 000 people were killed in the witch-hunts, most of them women. Most of them were burned at the stake, but also other means of execution were used. Altogether we know that about 110 000 individuals got in formal touch with the European legal system, accused of some kind of witchcraft, sorcery and magic. In addition to execution, sorcerers and witches could be expelled form their local communities, get fines, whipping or sent to prison. However, it was also possible to go through a witch trial that ended with acquittal. During the large witch hunt in Sweden in 1668-76, 60% of the accused were acquitted for their sorcery and witchcraft charges. In the north of Spain, the Inquisition set free thousands of accused witches in during the so called great Basque witch panic 1608-1614.

The witch persecution decreased in numbers gradually through the 18th century, and we find the last death sentences for witchcraft in the end of the century. The fact that the witch hunts were limited to a certain period in western civilization's history, is one of the central features of the

phenomenon, and something that separates the crime of witchcraft from most other serious crimes. In Norway we have court books and other sources of information which show that a little more than 330 people were executed for witchcraft from the 1570s to 1695. Slightly above 1000 people were formally tried and sentenced for some kind of witchcraft in Norway. The witch hunt in Norway struck the northeastern region of Finnmark the hardest, with at least 92 people getting their death sentence. The northern part of Norway has over 40 % of all the death sentences in the Norwegian witchcraft cases. All the numbers should be taken as the minimum number of cases. A lot of legal sources have been lost, and we are not able to see the whole picture. The last death sentence for witchcraft in Norway that we know of, is from Borkenes in Sør-Troms, where Jehanne Nielsdatter was burned at the stake in late 1695, after being found guilty in carrying out weather magic, which allegedly led to shipwreck and drowning.

The historical witch trials were a western phenomenon, which primarily took place in European countries. The European immigrants brought their belief in witches to the New World, and there were a few late cases of the persecution in the American colonies. The world's most notorious witch trials took place in Salem in Massachusetts in 1692. The witch trials in the German states were the worst, with about 25 000 known executions. The historian *Johannes Dillinger* has called Germany "The Mother of the Witches". Luxembourg, Switzerland, Austria, Scotland, Flanders, the Channel Islands, Eastern Finnmark in Norway, Dalarna in Sweden, are examples of countries and regions with a huge number of witch trials compared to the size of the population. We also find quite a few cases in countries like Poland, Hungary and parts of England. The trials were less prevalent in southern Italy, Spain, Portugal, Russia, Ireland, Holland and partial France. The European witch trials are not associated with the Inquisition in the Catholic countries. The Inquisition was more interested in heretics than in witches and was generally skeptical to accusations of witchcraft.

The trials against witches took place most often where most people lived in early modern Europe, in rural areas. Cases of witch-burnings happened only rarely in urban districts. However, in Norway's largest city at the time, Bergen, there were quite a few witch trials at the end of the 16th century. The most famous witch trial in Norway happened in Bergen in 1590. After struggling with the rumors of being a witch for a long time, the widow of a priest, Anna Pedersdotter, got her death sentence and was burned to death as a witch at Nordnes in Bergen. Today there is a memorial stone at the execution ground, remembering Anne and all the others who got death sentences for crimes of witchcraft in Norway.

Gender and social status

Almost 80 % of all the prosecuted were women. In some regions, like Iceland, Finland, Russia, Estonia, Normandie and amongst the Sámi people in the Nordic countries, there were almost as many or more male sorcerers than female witches. In Norway the sources show that there were about 50 death sentences given to men, while a little more than 280 women got the same sentence. In Northern Norway, the Sámi people make up about one fifth of the scope. The persecution of the Sámi people is also known to happen in Northern Finland and Northern Sweden. The fact that most offenders of a serious crime like witchcraft were women, is the most distinct hallmark of the era of the witch hunts. In the witch trials, there runs a deep undercurrent of misogyny. Early modern time is marked as a low point in women's history by historians, and the witch hunts could be seen as the worst manifestation of the derogatory view of women at the time.

The persecution of European witches seldom affected Jews, gypsies and other minorities. This also includes mentally sick or unstable persons; they were not amongst the sentenced witches either. The same goes for people with «strange» illnesses, like epilepsy.

The dominant image of the witch as poor, simple, old, lonely and smelly is not quite correct. The witches of Europe were not a typical poverty-stricken group. The witches were more often married women than not. Neither did they have any special occupation. In the sources from Finnmark, the witches make up a cross section of the coastal population. Many of the accused were older women, mainly over 40 years old. The reason for that may be that these women had lived with a rumor about them being witches for a long time before the legal authorities intervened. The French jurist *Jean Bodin* (1530-1596), who wrote about witchcraft in his book *De la demonomanie des sorciers* from 1580, believed that the witches were hideous, smelled awful and had a malignant look because of their intimate contact with Satan. According to Jean Bod, it was because of the pact with the devil that the women became old and ugly so fast.

Among the witches we find some young maids and girls, some under 12 years old. Some part of the witch cases from Sweden, Switzerland, the German states, Basque Country and New England with Salem are known for including children. Children played the roles as accusers, witnesses and suspects in these cases. During a court trial held in the fishing community of Vardø 1663, the prosecutors wanted to burn some girls under the age of 12. However, the cases against these girls were appealed to a higher court and the presiding court of appeal judge in Northern Norway,

Mandrup Pedersen Schønnebøl, acquitted them. The presiding court of appeal judge became a very important person in trying to stop the brutal witch hunts at least in Eastern Finnmark.

It was not unusual in Norway to find married couples being suspected of sorcery. A typical example is the case against *Ole* and *Lisbet Nypan*, they were both found guilty and executed in Trondheim in September 1670. Ole was beheaded, while Lisbet was burned at the stake.

Legislation

The crime of sorcery was reckoned as the most serious felony of the time. Diabolism, or the pact with the devil, was the worst form for witchcraft, but damaging spells and white magic were often at the court's attention. European legislation against witchcraft from the 16th and 17th centuries was often drawn directly from the Bible. Mosaic law was important in the legislation. Especially Protestant countries were to make an emphasis on the Law of Moses in the development of their legislation. The most known scripture, among others, is «Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live» from Exodus 22:18. The demonology explained that all kinds of magic had to be supplied from the outside, from Satan. It could not come from human traits and activities. In this way, all kind of magic became illegal, not just the black, damaging magic, but also white, healing magic.

Danish and Norwegian law from 1683 and 1687 (article 6-1-9) says «Befindis nogen Troldmand, eller Troldquinde, at have forsvoret Gud og sin hellige Daab og Christendom, og hengivet seg til Diævelen, den bør levendis at kastes på ilden og opbrændis.». Translated into English, it says that every male sorcerer or female witch who have given themselves to the devil, should be thrown into the fire and the burned alive. Most of the witches in Denmark and Norway got their sentenced according to the main regulation against sorcery from October 1617. In the legislation from 1617, witches are defined as those who have made a pact with the devil. The Norwegian laws of sorcery were not repealed until 1842. It might be mention here that, in the Scandinavian countries, the name of the crime was *trolldom* (sorcery), and the offender was called either *trollkvinne* or *trollmann* (sorcerer or sorceress), in plural *trollfolk* (*sorcerers*). In other words, *trolldom* and *trollfolk* are the correct legal and historical terms for this type of crime in the Nordic countries. *Witch* (heks) and *witchery* (hekseri) are new terms, and do not occur in Scandinavian legislation, and very seldom in the court books from the legal cases at the time.

As in most other countries, the presumed witches in Norway were sentenced by ordinary, secular courts, and not by special witch courts. In some countries, like Sweden in 1668-78, there could be set up special commissions for inspecting accusations of witchcraft.

The infamous water ordeal, or «witch swimming", was usually *not* under the provisions of the European legislation regarding witchcraft, including Denmark-Norway. This peculiar form for disclosure of witchcraft was *not* in widespread use in the Nordic countries. The witch trials in Finnmark are an exception to this. Here, the water test was used in about 30 cases. Both Norwegian women from the Norwegian fishing communities of Finnmark, and a few Sámi men were thrown into the sea to see if they floated or sank. None of those who had to endure the water test in Finnmark passed and were subsequently sentenced to death. The test was regarded as a judgment from God, where the prosecutors asked for a sign from God when they were unsure if the accused was guilty or not. If the person floated, it was a sign from God that the sanctified water repelled a sinner of sorcery. If the person sank, it could be a sign of innocence because the holy water pulled the person closer. Because everybody who endured the water test in Finnmark got sentenced and sent to the stake, it is an indication of how serious the test was perceived as proofs.

Towards a new conception of sorcery and witchcraft

Today there is a whole subculture of cultic communities which attracts searching souls from all parts of society. Some of these cults have adopted the witch character and made up their own ideas about her. Many perceive themselves as descendants of the historical witches. But with the notion that the witches are strong individuals with several positive qualities, as wisdom and cleverness. «Witch» is gradually becoming used as a badge of honor. The art of sorcery turns into positive activities like healing, meditation and neo shamanism - activities that give life energy and hope in a troubled, materialistic world. The words «witch» and «sorcery» are emptied for old, negatively charged ideas and are given new meanings. For the first time in western history, we are in a situation where the belief in sorcery is neither criminalized, ridiculed, pathologized or hidden. Unlike earlier times, there are no restrictions on magic and witchcraft in today's western world. With openness, exploration, and trial, many people seek the world of magic, without being suspected of anything. At the same time, it is important to remember that there are non-western countries where the persecution of witches is intense and ongoing today, like the witch hunts in Europe during the 16th and 17th century.

(Many thanks to *Amalie Alvee Wiig* for help with the translation).

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