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Historical Dictionary of Witchcraft

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Introduction

Witchcraft is an important and difficult historical subject. Throughout human history, most cultures and societies have conceived of certain categories of malevolent people who are supposedly able to access or exhibit powers of great supernatural evil. In Europe during the Middle Ages and the early-modern period, such people were believed to be in league with the devil and bent on the destruction of Christian society on earth. For over 300 years, from the 15th to the 18th centuries, social fear and legal paranoia led to the prosecution, and ultimately the execution, of tens of thousands of people for the supposed crime of witchcraft. The period is often described as being the era of "the great witch-hunts," or, by more sensationalistic authors, simply as the "burning times." Accurate figures are difficult to establish, but it seems that the number of trials for witchcraft exceeded 100,000 during this period, and the number of people executed as witches exceeded 50,000. Such figures are low in comparison to some overly credulous accounts (one occasionally still encounters claims that the victims of the witch-hunts numbered in the hundreds of thousands or even millions), and they certainly pale when compared to the scale of deadly repression exercised by some governments in the modern world. Nevertheless, especially in regions of particular intensity, the witch-hunts were a major preoccupation of early-modern religious and state authorities. Moreover, the number of trials alone surely does not indicate all those whose lives were affected in some way, and certainly almost never for the good, by suspicions of witchcraft during this time.

The primary focus of this dictionary will fall on the historical phenomenon of witchcraft as defined and constructed in Europe during the era of the great witch-hunts. Other varieties of magic and conceptions of harmful sorcery in other periods of history and in other world cultures will, however, also be treated to some extent. Because the concept

of witchcraft in medieval and early-modern Europe was informed by ideas, beliefs, and practices from the earlier Christian era, as well as from classical antiquity, some attention must also be given to those periods. Outside of the major Western civilizations, ideas of harmful magic and witchcraft have manifested in many ways. In particular, African varieties of witchcraft have been studied and often used as a basis for comparison with historical witchcraft in Europe. Such anthropologically informed scholarship has done much to increase understanding of how belief in witchcraft can function at a social level. Other magical beliefs and practices around the world have themselves been influenced by aspects of European witchcraft. For example, conceptions of harmful sorcery and those who practice it associated with the religion of Voodoo in Haiti and elsewhere in the Caribbean seem heavily influenced by Christian notions of witches. In addition, some treatment will be given to the modern world because not all of the beliefs that characterized historical witchcraft in Europe vanished with the end of the witch-hunts, and some have persisted even to the present day. Moreover, there now exists a substantial movement (or movements) of modern witchcraft, commonly termed *Wicca*. Although there is no credible evidence of any direct connection between the modern and historical variants of witchcraft in the Western world, some individuals and groups within modern witchcraft maintain that such connections do exist, and certainly some groups outside of modern witchcraft persist in associating modern witches with historical stereotypes.

DEFINITIONS

Anyone trying to understand witchcraft in a broad yet accurate historical sense must confront a number of problems, of which perhaps none is more basic than the difficult question of how to define exactly what elements constitute witchcraft. Seen in one way, witchcraft appears as a virtually universal and seemingly perennial aspect of almost all human cultures. Regarded in another way, the concept of witchcraft is highly contingent on historical time and place. Certainly, the crime for which tens of thousands of people went to their deaths in Europe and colonial America in the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries—the period of the great European witch-hunts—could only have existed, and can only be un-

derstood, within the specific Christian culture that prevailed at that time. By those who fear its reality, witchcraft has always been defined as a set of actions, practices, and behaviors that certain people actually perform to supposedly terrible effect, and witches are believed to cause great evil in the world through the harmful sorcery that they work, generally in close alliance with dark, supernatural forces. If one accepts this belief, then such a crime is certainly worthy of the harshest penalties any society can impose. To those skeptical of the reality of witchcraft, on the other hand, it exists only, or at least predominantly, as a construct in the minds of those who would use it as an excuse to persecute, and those accused of witchcraft are innocent victims caught in a deadly web of false beliefs and pious convictions.

These problems of definition are not just modern ones. Even during the period of the great European witch-hunts, when belief in the real existence and effectiveness of witchcraft was far more widespread than it is today, there were always those who doubted elements of the witch-stereotype. Given the level of general belief in magic and supernatural power in pre-modern European society, at least some of the people brought into court on charges of witchcraft probably were actually trying to perform some form of harmful sorcery that they thought would be effective against others in their communities. This does not mean, however, that these people necessarily thought that they had sold their souls to the devil or that they, in fact, gathered with others at secret conventicles in order to worship demons, as they were typically accused of doing (although certain individuals might actually have engaged in such activities in some way). Likewise, even some authorities, convinced of the power of the devil in the world and certain that some people were indeed entering his service in order to gain supernatural powers, were nonetheless skeptical about the existence of a vast, diabolically organized, conspiratorial cult of witches, and feared that a large number of false confessions were being obtained by the courts through the excessive use of torture and by other means. Authorities in the late-medieval and early-modern periods also had to explain the apparent newness of the threat posed by large numbers of witches—nothing like it had ever been described in earlier sources—while still maintaining the supposedly perennial nature of demonic power and diabolic evil.

Taken in the broadest sense, witchcraft can be defined as the performance of various harmful acts through sorcery. The belief that certain

people can and do work such harmful sorcery appears to have existed in almost every human culture throughout history. Witchcraft is also generally regarded as a low or common form of magic, as opposed to high or learned magic, which requires much arcane knowledge and training and is limited to certain elite groups within society. Acts of witchcraft typically involve only simple gestures, spells, or rituals, and witches are usually uneducated people of low social status, more frequently women than men. In many cases, the power of witchcraft is often regarded as somehow inherent in the witch herself, as opposed to lying in the ritual actions or spells that she performs. This special status that marks the witch herself as being intrinsically evil, as opposed to just performing evil acts, might be inherited from other family members or derived from some personal association with dark, supernatural forces.

All of these definitions of witchcraft might be applied to aspects of magic (itself a word that is extremely difficult to define precisely for all situations in which it is used) in many different human cultures and historical contexts. Yet the actual word "witchcraft," as well as its cognates in other European languages such as the German *Hexerei* or even to some extent the earlier French *sorcellerie,* developed to describe a particular phenomenon that existed, or at least was widely believed to exist, in Europe at the end of the Middle Ages (traditionally defined as the period up to about 1500) and the subsequent early-modern era (the 16th through the 18th centuries). In this particular context, all the conditions described above pertained, to a greater or lesser degree, but witchcraft actually had a far more specific definition. Witches were generally, although not necessarily, simple and uneducated people, mostly women. And witches were certainly thought to perform harmful sorcery, most commonly termed *maleficium* by secular and ecclesiastical authorities writing in Latin. But the real crime of witchcraft lay in the intense diabolical elements that authorities were convinced underlay these other aspects of the phenomenon.

Witches were believed to perform their harmful sorcery through the agency of demons whom they were able to command, often with only a few simple words, signs, or gestures. In order to attain this power over demons, authorities were convinced, witches offered worship to demons, in violation of the most basic tenets of the Christian faith. Beyond even this, witches were thought to have forsaken their faith entirely and to have surrendered themselves to the service of Satan. They

were believed to be members of widespread, satanic cults that met secretly at night, in the presence of the devil or some other presiding demon, to worship, celebrate, and perform a wide variety of horrible acts. This was the image of the witches' sabbath that first appeared in Europe in the early 15th century and persisted for the rest of the period of the witch-hunts. The more credulous and extreme among the authorities on witchcraft often wrote of hundreds if not thousands of witches infesting a given region, attending sabbaths, and acting in concert as members of an organized sect. Thus, the evil that witches represented was not simple human malice. Rather, they were seen as battalions in the demonic legions of Satan operating in secret to subvert and bring about the destruction of the Christian world. This concept of witches as comprising a widespread, conspiratorial, and entirely malevolent force in the world supported, indeed necessitated, the major efforts at witch-hunting that were undertaken primarily in the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries.

PRECEDENTS: MAGIC AND RELIGION IN THE ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL WORLDS

The figure of the witch, defined not only as someone who performed secretive and harmful sorcery, but also as someone who worked this sorcery through the agency of demons and who, forsaking the true faith, worshiped demons and the devil, only developed toward the end of the Middle Ages, appearing for the first time in the early 15th century. Although such a conception of witchcraft was only possible in a Christian society, still, in the most general terms, the two essential elements of witchcraft as conceived during the period of the witch-hunts—that it involved the performance of maleficent sorcery that caused real harm in the world, and that it also entailed serious violations of religious beliefs and practices—can be seen in the very earliest conceptions of magic to appear in ancient Western civilizations. Like witchcraft itself, magic is a difficult concept to define precisely, and distinctions between magical and religious rituals are notoriously difficult to draw. Yet almost all human cultures, it would seem, have posited certain boundaries, and indeed a certain opposition, between these two concepts.

In European history, at least by the fifth century B.C.E., as the city-states of Greece were entering into their golden age, religion, that is, the public

and communal cults of the city-states, was being defined to some extent in opposition to magic, that is, other systems for accessing supernatural power that were either private, secretive, or anti-social. Although priests engaged with the gods and other supernatural entities for the greater civic good, and functioned to maintain stability and social order, magicians in ancient Greece were private individuals, either seeking their own gain or hiring themselves out as professionals to whom other people would turn seeking individual magical services. The distinction was amplified by the fact that foreign religious systems were often categorized as magic. In fact, the Greek word *mageia* derived from the name for the Persian priestly cast, called *magoi* in Greek. In other words, while the rituals and practices of the Greek civic cults were "religion," the foreign rites and practices of the Persians were "magic." In addition, the Greek word *goeteia* was often used to describe the lower forms of magic, even further removed from religious ritual, and this concept is perhaps as close as the Greeks ever came to something like later European witchcraft.

The boundaries between all of these concepts and practices, however, were extremely tenuous. They certainly appear so to modern historians, and probably were for the ancients as well. For example, the two most famous images of sorceresses to appear in Greek literature are Circe and Medea. While both would later be considered witches and would contribute to the development of the idea of witchcraft in medieval, Christian Europe, in ancient legend both were also religious figures. Circe was a demigoddess, and Medea was either a demigoddess or a priestess of a foreign cult.

In the ancient Hebrew tradition, too, magic was often defined in terms of being harmful and anti-social but was also seen as a religious error, and the priests of foreign religions were deemed to be magicians. In the Book of Exodus in the Bible, listed among other regulations placed upon the Israelites, is the command not to permit a sorcerer or seer (Hebrew *kashaph*) to live, rendered famously in the 17th century King James' translation: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (Exodus 22:18). Such people were considered criminals due to the harmful magic that they employed. In 1 Samuel 28:3, just prior to the famous story of the Witch of Endor, King Saul is described as having driven out all the sorcerers and diviners from his kingdom because such people constituted an anti-social threat to the stability of his realm. The contrast between magic and religion is more clearly developed in other pas-

sages, such as Exodus 7:8–12. Here Moses and Aaron confront Pharaoh during the Israelites' captivity in Egypt, and, in order to demonstrate the power of the Hebrews' god, Aaron casts down his staff and it becomes a serpent. The priests of Pharaoh's court are able to replicate this feat with their own staffs by resorting to their "secret arts." Aaron's serpent devours theirs, however, thus proving the superiority of divine power. In 1 Kings 18:20–40, the prophet Elijah confronts the pagan priests of Baal, who have been corrupting the people of Israel. He has them build an altar and place sacrifices on it, and then pray to their god to send fire from heaven to consume the sacrifices. Though they try for many hours, no fire comes. Then Elijah builds an altar, and for good measure douses his sacrifice with water. Still, at his prayer, a great fire descends from heaven and consumes the sacrifice.

As Judaism developed into a fully monotheistic religion, that is, a system of belief maintaining not just that Israel had only one god, while other peoples might have many, but that the one god of Israel was in fact the single supreme deity of the entire universe, the idea of magic as a deviation from proper religious practice became further developed. This process culminated, however, only in the early Christian era. Although Judaism was monotheistic, it never had a clearly defined concept of the devil, that is, the principal opponent of the one god responsible for all evil in the universe, such as developed in Christianity. For early Christian authorities the power of Satan and the legions of lesser devils he commanded was set very directly against the power of God and the church in the world, and much magical practice became fully demonized. While holy men and women might perform miracles by calling on divine power, all other such wonders were actually the work of demons. The strict dichotomy was expressed in the New Testament account of Christ's chief apostle, Simon Peter, and the magician Simon Magus of Samaria (Acts 8:9–24). Seeing that the wonders that the apostles could perform were greater than those he could achieve, Simon Magus offered Peter money in exchange for some of his power. Later apocryphal accounts developed the rivalry between the miracle-working apostle and the demonic magician even further. In one story, Simon Magus tried to fly up to heaven, borne aloft by demons. At a word from Peter, however, the power of the demons failed and Simon Magus crashed to earth.

Because, in Christian cosmology, all demons were evil spirits in the service of the one great evil, Satan, who was the enemy of both God and

humankind, all magic, insofar as it entailed involvement with demonic forces, was inherently evil. The anti-social and religiously deviant aspects of magical practice were fully merged. It was the great church father Augustine of Hippo, who lived from 354 to 430 C.E., who gave this new Christian conception of magic its full form. In his most important work, *The City of God,* Augustine described the entire world in terms of the struggle between divine and demonic forces. All evil arose from demons, and all evil sorcery derived from demonic power. Moreover, Augustine fully articulated the concept of the pact made between the demon and the human magician who called upon it. Implacably hostile to humanity, demons would only offer their services in exchange for worship. Thus for Christian authorities the real crime of demonic magic, as ultimately for witchcraft, lay not in the harm that magic was supposedly able to cause, but in the religious violation of demon-worship that such magic was believed to entail.

With the full demonization of magic by Christian authorities achieved at least by the fifth century C.E., one might think that the concept of diabolic witchcraft would have appeared in late antiquity. This, however, was not the case. Rather, the initial general effect of the Christian conception of demonic magic seems to have been actually to reduce the culpability of human magicians. That is, Christian religious authorities recognized their real enemies as being the devil and his demons, who lay behind any harmful sorcery that a human magician might work. The magician was guilty only of having succumbed to temptation and the deceits of these demons. The punishments that religious authorities, mainly bishops, prescribed in cases involving sorcery were in fact generally more lenient than those laid out by secular Roman authorities in the harsh late-imperial legal code.

On into the early Middle Ages, for many centuries, clerical authorities remained relatively lenient in their treatment of sorcery. There are several possible reasons for this. First, in the wake of the influx of pagan Germanic tribes into the territories of the Western Roman Empire, and the expansion of Roman Christianity into lands that had never lain within the boundaries of the empire, clerical authorities probably focused more of their energies on spreading the religion, converting pagans, and stamping out or subsuming within Christian belief the elements of paganism that persisted among the great majority of people in the emerging medieval kingdoms of Europe. Also, in the wake of the

collapse of the Roman imperial system, for many centuries the church's own institutions and systems for exerting power and control were relatively weak and certainly not highly centralized. Above all, perhaps, clerical authorities did not, in general, seem to perceive demonic power, and hence demonic sorcery, as a serious threat during this period. The famous 10th century canon *Episcopi* (a document of church law named after its first word in Latin, "Bishops") warned bishops and their officials to take all steps necessary to eradicate the magical practices of *sortilegium* and *maleficium* from the regions under their control. The canon then went on to describe the widespread belief that there existed groups of women who would ride through the night sky with the pagan goddess Diana. Centuries later, this belief would contribute directly to the idea of the night flight of witches to a sabbath. In the 10th century, however, the canon declared that such ideas were merely delusions and deceptions of the devil, and that they had no basis in reality. Other documents show that many clerical authorities felt only penance and correction were needed to combat such beliefs, and that harsher punishments were not in order.

This is not to say that clerical authorities in the early Middle Ages did not accept the reality of demonic sorcery. But they were either unable or unwilling (most likely both) to respond to such beliefs and practices with widespread and highly organized campaigns of persecution. Insofar as harmful sorcery, *maleficium,* remained a crime to be prosecuted and punished in the early Middle Ages, it was mainly secular authorities who exercised jurisdiction over such cases. In Germanic legal codes, as in the law codes of the ancient world, *maleficium* was defined as a crime not primarily for its implications of religious deviance, but for the real harm that such sorcery was believed to be able to achieve. Such prosecutions, however, could not generate the necessary levels of fear and panic to spark a real witch-hunt, as would occur in later centuries. Although secular authorities in the early Middle Ages were certainly not unaware of the church's position that most, if not all, sorcery involved trafficking with demons, they do not seem to have stressed the point, and so the idea of sorcerers being in league with the devil and part of a larger conspiratorial assault on the entire Christian world never developed to the extent it later would. Also, sorcerers were not typically accused of membership in satanic cults, and no concept like the later witches' sabbath ever developed in the early medieval period. Rather,

individual accusations of sorcery tended to be settled without generating other accusations or anything like a widespread hunt.

An important aspect underlying the lack of any truly rampant persecution of sorcerers in the early Middle Ages was the use of accusatorial procedure in most European courts. This was a legal method whereby an accuser, a private person who felt himself to be afflicted or aggrieved in some way, not only brought the initial charge of a crime, but also bore the responsibility of prosecuting the case and demonstrating the guilt of the person accused. For a crime like sorcery, secretive by its very nature, hard evidence was usually difficult if not impossible to find, and witnesses were similarly scarce. In such cases, accusatorial procedure relied on the judicial ordeal (or for certain elite groups trial by combat) to determine guilt or innocence. Typically, the accused would be made to grasp a heated iron. If, several days later, the wound was judged to have healed sufficiently, the person was deemed innocent. Another common ordeal was for the accused to be immersed in a pool of water. If they did not immediately float to the surface (a sign that the pure water had not rejected them as being evil), they were judged innocent. In theory, such methods left the determination of guilt or innocence in the hands of God. In practice, they were uncertain at best. Since the accuser was responsible for proving his case, and was subject to legal penalties if the person accused was judged innocent, entirely frivolous cases were rare, and the sort of wild accusations that later typified the witch-hunts were almost unthinkable.

Around the 12th century, important developments began to take place that would lay the foundations for the emergence of witchcraft and witch-hunting centuries later. Perhaps most directly, Roman law was rediscovered across Europe, and the new legal method of inquisitorial procedure began to be used, first by ecclesiastical courts but then by secular courts as well, instead of the older accusatorial procedure. Under inquisitorial procedure, a private person could still bring a charge of some crime, but now judges could also initiate inquests themselves. In either case, after the initial accusation, the responsibility for prosecuting the case lay with the judges or magistrates. Rather than relying on practices like the ordeal, judges employed more rational methods, such as examination of witnesses and interrogation of the accused, as well as collection of any evidence that might be available. In cases of sorcery or witchcraft, however, where secrecy still

prevailed, evidence and witnesses were rare. Thus, the confession of the accused was virtually the only way to achieve a conviction. Since it was assumed that guilty people would lie to protect themselves, judges could employ torture. Under normal circumstances, use of torture should have remained limited and strictly regulated. In cases of witchcraft, however, where the crime was believed to be so severe, panic usually ran high, and the devil was often thought to exert his power to prevent guilty witches from confessing, the use of torture was often uncontrolled and excessive. In such cases, authorities could extract a lurid confession from virtually anyone accused.

Although the development of inquisitorial methods and use of torture provided a legal procedure that made rampant witch-hunting possible, legal changes alone were not enough to lead to the concept of witchcraft as developed in the late-medieval and early-modern periods. Authorities also had to be prepared to see a vast demonic conspiracy behind accusations of simple *maleficium*. Here, too, important changes began to occur around the 12th century. As part of the so-called "Renaissance of the 12th Century," the general revitalization of intellectual life in Europe, classical Greek and Roman, Hebrew, and Arabic texts were rediscovered and began to circulate more widely among educated, mainly clerical, elites. Among these texts were learned treatises on magical arts, including astrology and alchemy, and also works discussing forms of magic and divination performed through the invocation of spirits or demons. These authoritative sources took the reality and power of demonic magic seriously, and so clerical writers in Europe followed suit. By the middle of the 13th century, the great scholastic authority Thomas Aquinas was devoting significant sections of his major theological works to exploring and explaining the powers of demons. Aquinas' writings were arguably the most important treatment of demonology in the Western Christian tradition since Augustine in the fifth century. By the early 1300s, the older, less intensely focused clerical attitude toward demonic sorcery had given way to profound concern at the very highest levels of the church. Pope John XXII, who reigned from 1316 until 1334, was deeply worried about the threat posed by practitioners of demonic sorcery. He ordered papal inquisitors to take actions against this crime, and he passed an automatic sentence of excommunication against anyone who engaged in such activities. By the later 14th century, the theologian and inquisitor Nicolau Eymeric crafted a definitive

theological and legal argument that all demonic sorcery was heretical and necessarily involved the worship of demons. The stage for the emergence of diabolical witchcraft was set.

THE EMERGENCE OF WITCHCRAFT AND THE AGE OF THE EUROPEAN WITCH-HUNTS

In the early 15th century, the fully developed idea of European witchcraft—of witches as demonic sorcerers who worshiped the devil and formed a vast, conspiratorial, diabolic cult dedicated to the destruction of the Christian world—began to emerge. Especially in lands in and around the western Alps, where some of the first true witch-hunts took place, the number of trials involving charges of harmful and maleficent sorcery increased significantly. In addition, even when the initial accusations might still focus only on traditional aspects of *maleficium,* judicial authorities increasingly began interjecting their own notions of diabolism and demonic conspiracy into the trials. The decade of the 1430s seems to have been a critical turning point. Within only a few years, a number of treatises and other learned accounts describing witchcraft were written. While these accounts all differed from one another in various ways, they all described witchcraft not just in terms of demonic *maleficium,* but also as an organized sect and diabolical conspiracy. Several of the authors of these treatises were associated in one way or another with the great church Council of Basel, which met from 1431 until 1449. This council seems to have served as an important center for the development and diffusion of the emerging stereotype of witchcraft. Clerics from across Europe came to Basel to attend the council, and might well have taken notions of witchcraft back with them when they left.

The last three quarters of the 15th century, from approximately 1425 until 1500, mark the beginnings of the witch craze in Europe. The first real witch trials occurred in this period and, although initially they were fairly localized to the lands around the western Alps, they spread and increased steadily in number. The century also saw the publication of the first major treatises on witchcraft, beginning with the group of writings clustered around the 1430s, and culminating in the publication of the most famous medieval witch-hunting manual, *Malleus maleficarum,*

or *Hammer of Witches,* written by the Dominican inquisitor Heinrich Kramer (Institoris in Latin) and first printed in 1487. Although the *Malleus* never served as the sole or definitive source on all aspects of witchcraft and demonology, it was very popular, circulated widely, and was reprinted many times. Certainly by the end of the century, the stereotype of witches as demon-worshipers and servants of Satan, as laid out in the *Malleus* and other similar works, was widely established across Europe. Individual witch trials and even some small-scale hunts (compared to what was to come) were occurring with increasing frequency in many lands. The rise of the great European witch-hunts was not a smooth trajectory, however, and shortly after 1500 there occurred a long lull in the escalation of witch-hunting.

Beginning around the turn of the century, and for at least the first half of the 1500s, the number of witch trials in many regions of Europe leveled off, and in some areas even declined. In an apparent corollary development, the production of new treatises on witchcraft dried up and older treatises fell somewhat out of favor. For example, no new edition of the *Malleus maleficarum* was printed from 1521 until 1576. Scholars are uncertain why this lull should have occurred. Some cite the influence of Renaissance humanism. In this period, humanist ideas spread from Italy to the rest of Europe. Humanist thinkers were often skeptical of witchcraft, or at least of the existence of large cults of witches. In addition, insofar as the conception of diabolical witchcraft rested on principals of medieval scholastic demonology, fear of witches may have been reduced by the humanists' many critiques of scholasticism in general. It must be noted, however, that while humanism differed from scholasticism as an intellectual method and in its approach to older, authoritative texts, nothing in Renaissance humanist thought challenged the basic Christian notion of the devil or the real existence of demons. Thus nothing in Renaissance humanism was inherently opposed to belief in witchcraft.

Historians have also argued that the first phase of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century may have contributed to the lull in witch trials. The relationship between the Reformation and the continued development of the witch craze in Europe is complex. On the one hand, Protestant theologians naturally tended to disregard many aspects of earlier Catholic theology and were not inclined to regard medieval clerical authors, such as those who wrote the earliest treatises on witchcraft, as

being in any way authoritative. However, Protestant theologians certainly did not deny the existence or real power of demons or the devil, and ultimately Protestant theories of witchcraft were virtually identical to Catholic ones. If anything, Protestantism was even more concerned about the power of the devil in this world than medieval Catholicism had been. In the short term, however, it seems as if the initial shock of Martin Luther's successful break with the Catholic Church and the other subsequent breakaways that he helped to inspire, as well as the Catholic response, occupied so much of the attention of religious and secular authorities across Europe that little energy was left to expend on concern over witches at least for a time.

In the long run, though, the Reformation may have contributed significantly to the severity of later witch-hunts by helping to promote the jurisdiction of secular courts over this crime. Witchcraft had always been a crime under both church law, as a form of idolatry and demon-worship, and secular law, since *maleficium* was believed to cause real harm, injury, or death. In fact, secular courts were often more severe in their handling of cases of witchcraft than were many ecclesiastical courts. In Protestant lands after the Reformation, ecclesiastical courts were done away with, and secular authorities became responsible for the enforcement of moral and religious codes. A similar process was already underway in many Catholic lands, but the Reformation doubtless accelerated this development. When witch-hunting began to rise again after the mid-1500s, secular courts were responsible for the vast majority of witch-trials across Europe. The only major exceptions were in Spain and Italy, where the Spanish Inquisition and Roman Inquisition respectively oversaw many cases. It is worth noting that witch-hunting was much less severe in these regions, with fewer overall trials per capita and significantly fewer executions than in many northern lands.

In addition to possibly contributing to some of the legal developments that underlay the witch-hunts, the Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation certainly caused matters of religious belief and personal morality to be brought to the fore of the European consciousness for most of the 16th and early 17th centuries. While confessional conflict does not appear to have been directly responsible for many accusations of witchcraft, the heightened and sustained religious tensions that pervaded much of European society in these years probably did

contribute to concerns about religious deviance and moral corruption, and ultimately to the fear of witches within many communities. The religious wars sparked by confessional conflict that engulfed Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries also certainly contributed to harsh economic conditions and social strife that then produced accusations of witchcraft. The period from 1550 to 1650 is sometimes known as "Europe's iron century." War, agrarian failures, popular revolts, inflation, and economic and social dislocations on a wide scale wracked the continent. It is certainly no coincidence that the idea of witchcraft and the fear of witches that emerged first in the 15th century found new life in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, and that this was the period of the most intense witch-hunting in many regions of Europe.

After the lull in the early 1500s, around in the middle of that century the number of witch trials across the continent began to rise again, and the period from approximately 1575 to 1675 marked the height of the European witch-hunts. Not only did the number of trials rise to the highest levels ever in most regions of the continent, but almost all of the worst panics and largest hunts occurred during this period. In addition, the production of treatises on witchcraft and witch-hunting resumed. The *Malleus maleficarum* was reprinted again in 1576 and several times thereafter, and even more popular and influential new treatises appeared by Jean Bodin in 1580, Nicholas Rémy in 1595, Martin Del Rio in 1599, and Francesco Maria Guazzo in 1608. By the middle of the 17th century, however, witch-hunting was again declining across much of Europe. Scotland and Scandinavia experienced their most severe outbreaks of witch-hunting in the 1660s and early 1670s respectively, and the persecution of witches in the British colonies in New England crested with the trials at Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692. Elsewhere in Western and Central Europe, however, the number of witch trials fell off rapidly, and many states began to officially end witch-hunting. In France, for example, King Louis XIV effectively ended witch trials in 1682, and in England Parliament repealed the witchcraft act in 1736. In Eastern Europe, concern over witchcraft and witch-hunting developed late, and in regions of Poland, Hungary, and Russia, the worst trials occurred in the 18th century. This regional anomaly aside, however, the period from 1675 until 1750 can generally be seen as one of steady decline in witch-hunting. By the end of the 18th century, the legal persecution of supposed witches had ended across Europe.

GENERAL NATURE OF THE WITCH-HUNTS

During the main period of witch-hunting in the 16th and 17th centuries, fear of witches manifested itself in many forms. Nevertheless, certain generalizations about the pattern of witch-hunting can be made. A trial would most often begin with an accusation of *maleficium.* Such charges usually arose as a result of some sort of otherwise unexplainable misfortune—the sudden death of a child, cows no longer giving milk, a crop failure, or other similar events. As for the direction the charges took, that is, who was accused of being a witch, this usually reflected long-standing interpersonal animosities of the sort that could be quite common in small, tightly knit communities. People in pre-modern Europe were accustomed to sudden and unexplained calamities and did not automatically assume that witchcraft lay behind all such events. However, when established animosity existed, often having developed over years, then people might indeed become ready to explain their misfortune as being the result of malevolent witchcraft directed against them by certain of their neighbors or often enough even by family members. *Maleficium* might be a particularly attractive explanation for a misfortune that occurred soon after some quarrel or other conflict, especially if, in the course of the argument, the other party had uttered a curse or made some sort of general threat.

In theory, almost anyone could be a witch. In practice, however, those most likely to be accused of witchcraft were people who lived on the margins of their communities. The poor, especially those who begged from the rest of the community and thereby continually strained the social bonds between themselves and the community, the elderly, especially elderly women who had neither husbands nor children to care for them, or anyone who acted strangely or in an anti-social manner were all typical targets of witchcraft accusations. For a variety of social and cultural reasons, women in general were especially vulnerable to charges of witchcraft, and across Europe an average of 75 percent of those executed for this crime were female. In some regions, as high as 90 percent of the victims of witch trials were women, although in some other regions, men were in the majority. As many scholars have noted, witchcraft was a gender-related crime but by no means a gender-specific one.

Although most everyone in medieval and early-modern Europe was familiar with religious teachings about the power of demons and the as-

sociation of witches with the devil, the majority of witch trials began with charges only of *maleficium,* and elements of diabolism did not usually figure prominently in the initial accusations. Most people, it would seem, were concerned about the potential harm witches could do to them and not about any larger, diabolical conspiracy existing in their midst. Once accusations were brought into the courts, however, authorities would be sure to inject charges of diabolism into cases in which these were not already present, and clearly the general populace was not averse to this occurrence and fully accepted that witches were indeed in league with Satan.

Once a trial began, it could proceed in several ways. The simplest possibility, and probably what happened in a large number of cases, was that an acquittal or conviction would be attained and the process would end there, with just the single, isolated trial. Also likely, however, was that a single trial might lead to a larger hunt. Other people might begin coming forward with accusations of witchcraft, the magistrates conducting the trial might broaden the scope on their own, or the accused witch might name accomplices, either voluntarily or under torture. Thus, even a single accusation could lead to numerous trials. In most cases, after several trials, and in all likelihood several convictions and executions, this sort of medium-level hunt would end of its own accord. Judges would become satisfied that they had found all the witches present in a community and no further accusations would be made. In some cases, however, a hunt could spiral out of control if, for whatever reason, the initial few trials created a high enough level of panic in the community, or concern among the prosecuting officials was raised to a sufficient level. In these cases, accusations would not dry up, and zealous magistrates might press their investigations, convinced that more witches would be uncovered. Often, the use of torture became more intense, and thus confessions came more quickly and became more extreme. A fair sign that a hunt was getting out of control was that the typical stereotype of the witch began to break down and accusations came to fall increasingly on men and on wealthier and more socially prominent people.

Not many hunts became widely out of control, but when they did, they could claim scores or even hundreds of victims and threaten to destroy entire communities. Because the uncontrolled use of torture could virtually guarantee confession and conviction in almost all cases, and because

even a single witch might accuse dozens more, there was no natural break to the process. Such large-scale hunts typically ended only when the authorities involved reached a crisis of confidence. That is, they had to become convinced that they were extracting mostly false confessions and therefore were attaining mostly false convictions. Only then would they either stop the trials or at least become more cautious in their acceptance of evidence and use of torture. In the face of more acquittals than convictions, the level of panic that could grip a community usually then subsided, and the hunt came to an end.

REGIONAL VARIATIONS

Any discussion of the general pattern of witch-hunts for all of Europe is complicated by the degree of regional variance in levels of concern and responses to this crime in the 16th and 17th centuries. Although the basic idea of witchcraft was accepted in almost all European lands, including colonial possessions overseas, nevertheless there were important differences in the acceptance of certain aspects of the witch-stereotype, and certainly in the patterns of prosecution that fear of witches created. Central Europe was without a doubt the heartland of the witch-hunts. The lands of the German Empire and the Swiss Confederation experienced the greatest overall numbers of witch trials and also the most severe panics and largest hunts. Yet even within this region, because of the political fragmentation of the Empire and the independence of the numerous Swiss cantons, significant geographical variations in the level of witch-hunting were evident. In general, Switzerland and the southern and western regions of the German Empire, where political fragmentation was highest and there existed numerous small and essentially autonomous states and legal jurisdictions, saw the most severe hunts. In the northern and eastern parts of the German Empire, including the large southeastern region of Bavaria, where political entities were larger, witch-hunting was significantly less severe.

Similarly in France, at the time the largest unified state in Europe in terms of population, many thousands of witch trials were conducted in the 16th and 17th centuries, but accusations and especially executions for the crime of witchcraft, measured per capita, were far lower than in the smaller states within the German Empire. In France, too, there were

major variations in the intensity of witch trials from region to region. Overall, far more witch-hunting took place on the fringes of the country than in the central regions, or more accurately, than in those regions that were more firmly and fully under the centralized control of the royal government in Paris. Across Europe, this pattern would hold. In those regions that had large, centralized legal bureaucracies, witch trials were less frequent and large-scale hunts, involving dozens or even hundreds of trials, were extremely rare. Larger-scale bureaucracies tended to be more careful in their conduct of trials and to focus more on matters of legal procedure, such as proper application of the restrictions on the use of torture. This in turn significantly reduced, although by no means eliminated, convictions for witchcraft and worked to prevent individual accusations from sparking major hunts. In regions of greater local legal autonomy, on the other hand, magistrates were often more careless in their adherence to proper legal procedures and were more likely to be swept along by the level of panic that could be generated in a community when one or more serious accusations of witchcraft were made.

In the British Isles, England had some episodes of severe persecution of witches, but overall the level of witch-hunting was lower than on the continent. For various reasons, continental notions of diabolism—the idea of a conspiratorial cult of witches gathering at nocturnal sabbaths and worshiping the devil—never gained as much acceptance in England as elsewhere in Western and Central Europe, and many witch trials focused only on the practice of *maleficium.* In addition, England had never fully adopted inquisitorial procedure, and most especially torture was extremely limited under English law. These factors worked to keep the intensity of fear over witchcraft and the level of witch-hunting down. Scotland, by comparison, where notions of diabolism gained a wider credence and where the central government was less able to enforce restrictions on the use of torture, experienced more major witch-hunts, although the overall intensity was still not as severe as in Central European lands. Also the British colonies in New England experienced more severe witch-hunting (again per capita) than in the mother country. Here, concern over witchcraft was deeply enmeshed with broader Puritan concerns over morality, temptation, and the power of the devil.

In Northern and Southern Europe—Scandinavia and Mediterranean lands—the persecution of witches was relatively light, although some large-scale hunts certainly did occur. In Spain and Italy, perhaps somewhat

ironically, this reduced intensity was primarily a result of the existence of the Spanish and Roman Inquisitions in those lands. Although ecclesiastical inquisitors had been among the first to develop the notion of diabolical witchcraft, in the 16th and 17th centuries the Spanish and Roman Inquisitions were large, centralized, bureaucratic organizations. As such, they exerted the same restraint on witch trials as other centralized legal bureaucracies elsewhere. In the lands of Eastern Europe, witch-hunting came late and also endured later than in western lands, with the most severe hunts in many regions only coming in the early 18th century. Here, too, however, there were significant regional differences. The only eastern state to experience major hunts on the scale of some of those in German lands was Poland. Hungary had fewer witch trials, although still a significant number. Further east, in Russian lands, witch-hunting was very late and very limited. Among other factors, the Eastern Orthodox Church never operated under the same model of intense diabolism as was present in both Catholic and Protestant lands to the west.

DECLINE OF WITCH-HUNTING AND SURVIVAL OF WITCH-BELIEFS

As early as the mid-17th century in some lands, and certainly by the 18th century across much of Europe (excluding the east), large-scale witch-hunting was in decline. This did not mean, however, that belief in the reality of witchcraft or the potential threat posed by witches was declining. Rather, the decline of witch-hunting preceded any lessening in actual belief in witchcraft and was caused primarily, it would seem, by a more limited sort of purely legal skepticism. In a sense, the witch-hunts undermined themselves by their own severity, and more and more authorities became concerned with the abuses of legal procedure, primarily the rampant use of torture, that took place in many courts, and the obviously large number of false convictions that were being extracted. While not denying the power of the devil or the possible existence of real witches, authorities increasingly became convinced that witchcraft did not exist as a widespread threat. With the application of more careful legal procedures, more people accused of witchcraft were shown to be innocent, and the level of fear and panic that had fueled the largest hunts was dissipated. Gradually, this legal skepticism was sup-

plemented by a level of real skepticism about the very possibility of witchcraft. Nevertheless, belief in the real existence of at least some witches remained widespread among most of the European population, if not among the ruling elites, well into the 19th century.

Although belief in the reality of witchcraft remained widespread at many levels of European society, the legal prosecution of witches and conduct of witch trials required cooperation between populations and ruling elites, and in the course of the 1700s government after government put an end to witch trials. The last legal executions for witchcraft took place toward the end of this century. The end of officially sanctioned witch-hunting certainly had an effect on the nature of commonly held witch-beliefs and popular reaction to suspected cases of witchcraft. Greater historical shifts would be needed, however, to end the widespread belief in harmful sorcery and the existence of witches.

Belief in witchcraft in the most general sense—that of harmful sorcery or *maleficium*—seems almost a universal aspect of pre-modern human societies and functions to meet a variety of social needs. In almost all cultures in which it appears, the concept of witchcraft, however specifically defined, serves mainly as an explanation for unexpected misfortune or natural calamities, and as an outlet to express social conflict within tightly knit communities existing in a largely agrarian context. Such cultures support the belief in harmful sorcery and witchcraft in many ways, and ultimately it is the very nature of these cultures that must change in order to undermine these ideas. In Europe, the widespread belief in the existence of witches does not appear to have declined significantly until the profound demographic, economic, political, legal, and social changes brought about as a result of the industrial revolution permeated most regions of the continent and most levels of European society, and this process was not complete until the 19th and in some areas even well into the 20th century.

Even as this process was underway, however, ideas of magic and occultism were taking new forms. Already in the 18th century, European elites began to form numerous secret societies, the most well known of which were the Masonic orders. Certain elements within these elite groups, such as the Rosicrucians or Illuminati, were drawn to magic and occult practices. By the end of the 19th century, in 1888, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was founded in England as a socially elite, secret society explicitly devoted to the study and practice of magic and

occultism. At the same time, spiritualism was becoming extremely popular with the urban middle classes of Europe, and all manner of seers and mediums, such as the famous and outrageous Madame Blavatsky, were capturing the public imagination with their claims of supernatural powers and ability to commune with the dead and foretell the future. Even today, the continued prominence of astrology, tarot reading, and other forms of divination—to say nothing of the actual practice of ritual magic by some groups—speaks to the continued willingness of many people in modern, industrialized, and technologically sophisticated society to believe in the existence of magical or occult forces.

WITCHCRAFT IN OTHER WORLD CULTURES

In Europe, witchcraft developed along a particular historical trajectory, deeply influenced by Christian concepts of evil, the devil, and demonology, but shaped also by unique European social and legal developments. For these reasons, the great witch-hunts that occurred in Europe from the 15th to the 18th centuries have never been matched elsewhere in the world. Nevertheless, witchcraft in a more general sense, understood to mean simply the practice of harmful forms of sorcery by malevolent individuals, can be said to have existed in virtually every human culture throughout history. As these figures have almost universally inspired fear and anxiety, so attempts at suppression of witchcraft and the eradication of witches have also occurred throughout human history, although never on the scale of the witch-hunts of Europe.

Witchcraft has been a concern, it seems, from the very dawn of humankind. In ancient Mesopotamia, people believed that the world was full of hostile supernatural forces and demons bent on the destruction of human civilization. Both magical and religious rituals were widely employed to combat these hostile forces, which appear to have threatened to undermine human society in much the way that witchcraft was later conceived in Christian Europe. Authorities were concerned to expose and punish any witches—individuals who aided or directed these demonic or hostile forces—and to devise means of protection from this threat. The Babylonian magical ritual *maqlu*, for example, meaning "burning" and referring to the incineration of certain magical effigies, was designed to counter witchcraft. The ancient Greek and Roman re-

sponses to such supernatural threats have already been described briefly above, and they provided at least one basis for later European conceptions of and reactions to witchcraft.

Throughout the ancient Near-East and into South- and East-Asia, belief in harmful magic and malevolent, witch-like figures is known to have existed. As late as the 18th century, a major panic over the supposed threat of harmful sorcery and the perceived existence of a conspiracy of evil sorcerers occurred in China. Beliefs akin to witchcraft have also been widespread in Africa and civilizations in the Americas. Since, especially in Africa, these beliefs have persisted openly into the modern era, they have been much studied by European anthropologists and in turn by historians seeking to make comparisons to historical witchcraft and witch-beliefs in Europe. Many similarities are evident. In most African societies, for example, women are far more commonly associated with witchcraft than are men. In addition, witches are often perceived to be not merely individual practitioners of harmful magic, but somehow organized and threatening to all of human society. In attempting to distinguish "witchcraft" from mere "sorcery," anthropologists have often categorized as sorcery those beliefs that involve humans learning to manipulate supernatural forcers in certain ways. Witchcraft, by contrast, is defined as operating (or being believed to operate) through some innate power found in the witch herself. Following this distinction, any person might learn to perform acts of sorcery, but only those born with innate power can be witches, and this power marks them as being inherently evil beings. This distinction is useful for many African and other world cultures, but would not seem to apply to Europe, where, historically, witches were believed to acquire their evil powers from the devil or from demons, not from any internal ability that they naturally possessed. European witches were, however, certainly often seen as inherently evil beings, because they had supposedly abandoned the true Christian faith and surrendered their souls to the devil.

Many traditional African magical beliefs were brought to the Americas during the period of the slave trade. In the Caribbean and elsewhere, these beliefs merged with the Christian beliefs of the slaves' colonial masters, and this resulted in the emergence of new, syncretistic systems. Voodoo (or, as more of its practitioners prefer, Vodoun) and Santería are the most commonly known examples of new systems of belief created out of the merger of traditional African and European concepts of magic

and religion. Both Vodoun and Santería are properly identified as religions practiced by many people in the Caribbean, in Latin America, and to some extent in major centers of Hispanic population in North America. Both include certain practices that could be seen as more magical than religious, however, particularly those practices focusing on providing protection from harmful sorcery, and both include beliefs in malevolent figures similar in many ways to witches. Clearly, notions of witchcraft have not been limited to European societies, and they are not confined solely to the pre-modern period of world history.

HISTORICAL STUDY AND MODERN WITCHCRAFT

In the course of the 19th century, European scholars first began to address the question of historical witchcraft and the witch-hunts of the late-medieval and early-modern periods in a serious way (although many of their conclusions were based more on their own ideological convictions than on the historical evidence). As early as 1828, the German scholar Karl-Ernst Jarcke advanced the theory that those persecuted for witchcraft had in fact been practicing an ancient, pagan religion. His purpose was in some way to justify, or at least to rationalize, the witch-hunts as a serious effort on the part of ecclesiastical and secular authorities to enforce a real Christianization on the populace. In 1862, the French historian Jules Michelet published his study, *La sorcière,* making a similar argument, but to opposite effect. Michelet presented the supposed religion of witchcraft as a means of positive popular resistance against the oppressive authority of the church in the Middle Ages. The witch-hunts were for him not a rational and necessary step in the progress of European history, but an instance of terrible persecution and repression by zealous and unenlightened religious authorities.

Also in the 19th century, the Romantic Movement had spurred a major interest in folk-culture among European elites. Professional and amateur folklorists began cataloging and studying popular or traditional beliefs and practices, which of course at this time still included a belief in *maleficium* and other elements of witchcraft. While not typically credulous of these beliefs themselves, many 19th-century folklorists were clearly fascinated by and drawn to such subject matter. Academic anthropologists as well began delving into the structures, and possible

realities, of ancient myths. In his *Teutonic Mythology,* published in 1844, Jacob Grimm argued that the historical stereotype of witchcraft included many elements drawn from traditional Germanic folk culture and the remnants of pre-Christian religious beliefs. In 1890, the first edition of James Frazier's *The Golden Bough* appeared, in which he explored the apparent unities between the mythologies of many ancient cultures, centered on the supposed existence of a single ancient fertility goddess and her consort who enacted a ritual of life, death, and rebirth that gave form to the seasonal cycle of the year. By the early 20th century, Frazier's ideas, and a focus on mythology rather than actual ancient cultures, were falling out of favor with many professional anthropologists, but were becoming highly popularized, and *The Golden Bough* sold extremely well to a general readership.

Frazier's notions of a single basic fertility myth underlying the core mythologies of many ancient cultures was profoundly influential on the emergence of modern witchcraft in the 20th century through the person of Margaret Murray. Murray was a British Egyptologist and amateur anthropologist who became interested in the historical phenomenon of witchcraft in medieval and early-modern Europe. In looking through the sources on witchcraft, she came to believe that she saw the vestiges of just the sort of ancient religion that Frazier had postulated. Clerical authors had, in her view, twisted the actual practices of this religion into diabolical rituals, but in the supposed orgies and depraved feasting of a witches' sabbath, Murray saw pagan fertility rituals. These festivals were presided over by an ancient, horned fertility god, such as the Greco-Roman Pan or Celtic Cernunnos, whom clerical authors had transformed into the Christian devil. In 1921, Murray published her first book on witchcraft, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe,* in which she advanced her basic argument that historical witchcraft had in fact been a remnant of an ancient fertility religion. In *The God of the Witches*, published in 1933, she presented her theories about the nature of the witches' sabbath and the corruption of the pagan horned god into the Christian devil by clerical authorities. By the time of 1954's *The Divine King of England,* Murray was maintaining that every English king from the time of William the Conqueror in the 11th century to James I in the 17th had been members of the secret religion of witchcraft, which survived as a powerful but clandestine force throughout this period.

From the start, many scholars were as skeptical of Murray's theories as they were intrigued. As her claims became more outlandish, skepticism increased. Since the 1950s, all of her theories and arguments have been largely disproved. Although it now seems clear that certain elements of the stereotype of witchcraft, especially night flight and the transformation of witches into animals, were indeed rooted to some extent in the remnants of ancient beliefs and folk-practices that were widespread across Europe, there is no evidence that historical witchcraft was in any way directly connected to pre-Christian pagan religions. Instead, historical European witchcraft was a thoroughly Christian construct, derived primarily from biblical, patristic, and medieval scholastic notions of magic and demonology. Certainly, the widespread witch-hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries were in no way an attempt by Christian authorities to destroy a surviving archaic pagan religion that continued to exist in their midst.

Nevertheless, Murray's notions provided a basis for the initial development of modern witchcraft, often termed *Wicca*, in Europe in the second half of the 20th century. The man most responsible for this development was Gerald Gardner, an English civil servant and amateur student of world religions who spent much of his life in the Far East before retiring to England. Once back in his native country, he claimed to have discovered and been inducted into a coven of traditional, hereditary witches who practiced an ancient religion and who could trace their lineage back to the Middle Ages. In 1954, he published *Witchcraft Today,* in which he claimed to be introducing the genuinely ancient beliefs and practices of this coven to the world. In fact, the book was largely a mixture of the theories of Margaret Murray (with whom Gardner had collaborated as a member of the British Folklore Society in the late 1930s and who wrote an approving preface to *Witchcraft Today*), aspects of world religions, and ritual magic and occultism (Gardner had been made an honorary member of the *Ordo Templi Orientis*, an elite magical society, by the famed occultist Aleister Crowley, who in turn had years earlier been a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn). Nevertheless, Gardner's book served as the primary genesis of the modern movement of witchcraft, and his followers and those inspired by him were convinced that they were merely continuing the practice of an ancient, pre-Christian form of religion.

In many ways a reaction to the apparent bankruptcy many people saw in the traditional Western religions in the wake of the horrors of the first half of the 20th century, Wicca, along with other varieties of neo-paganism, flourished in the counter-culture atmosphere of the 1960s and 1970s. The movement originated by Gardner was never strongly unified or cohesive, and many different traditions of modern witchcraft quickly emerged. By 1979, the movement as a whole came of age with the publication of two important works, both by American authors. Starhawk, a witch and political activist, wrote *The Spiral Dance,* which unified essentially Gardnerian forms of Wiccan belief and practice with a lyrical internal spirituality that embraced personal liberty, environmentalism and respect for nature, and especially feminism and female spiritual empowerment. The book largely superseded Gardner's *Witchcraft Today* to become the essential expression of modern witchcraft. In the same year, the journalist and practicing witch Margot Adler wrote *Drawing Down the Moon*, the first serious study of the origins and development of the Wiccan movement. Adler recognized that, especially in light of near-universal scholarly dismissal of the theories of Margaret Murray and serious suspicions about Gerald Gardner's reliability, the claim that modern Wicca was a direct continuation of an actual ancient religion that had survived underground for over a millennium could not be seriously maintained. However, the supposed pseudo-history of the Wiccan faith could be viewed as a foundation myth without in any way undermining the value of current Wiccan beliefs and practices.

Most modern witches now fully accept that, rather than continuing an ancient form of pre-Christian religion, they are practitioners of a new religion creatively based on ancient forms and principals. An aspect of this religion continues to be the working of spells and ritual magic, which modern Wiccans believe have real power. In this sense, they are, in fact, continuing in the true historical tradition of witchcraft, which has always placed this phenomenon, in various ways, at the juncture where religious belief meets magical practice.