

Misconceptions about the Great Witch Hunt

<http://www.iit.edu/~phillips/personal/grammar/BurningTimes.html>

by Winter

There are many misconceptions about the Great Witch Hunt during the Burning Times. I would like to dispel some of them. Most of the information here can be found in the well documented study of Kurt Baschwitz: Hexen und Hexenprozesse ("Witches and witch trials", 1966, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag GmbH & Co, Nördlingen, Germany, translations should be available). A distinction will be made between trials of heretics and the witch trials proper that were derived from them.

In a heresy trial, the aim was to exterminate heterodox ideas, generally in the service of the authorities. To reach this aim:

Leading heretics, recidivists, and those who did not renounce their ideas were executed.

Heterodox ideas were discredited by forcing heretics to renounce their ideas in public .

Potential followers were intimidated by demonstrating the savage torture and severe punishments that awaited heretics.

In such a trial, torture and execution were not inevitable, Joan of Arc was not tortured (1431, this would have made any confession of her useless to the English). Even in famous cases, like that against the Knights of the Temple (1305-1313), the rank and file of the followers were not executed if they renounced their ideas.

Because the prosecution was genuinely interested in the ideas that were on trial, transcripts and protocols of these trials are of great historical value.

In a proper witch trial, the aim was to exterminate the witches as conspirators with the devil.

No mercy was ever shown. Both torture and execution were deemed necessary. Witch hunters were often "self employed" and hired by the local authorities.

Because any connection with reality was lost in these trials, and the prosecutors were not interested in the beliefs of their victims, transcripts and protocols offer little help in the study of witchcraft and paganism at these times.

A sophisticated myth was developed around the Witches Sabbath.

The use of this myth can be seen as the defining feature of a witch trial. It combined conspiracy theories against the Christian world, old (recycled) accusations of human sacrifice, more specific: the sacrifice of newborns, cannibalism, and a very distorted image of old Celtic shamanic practises involving a night-time hunt with the Goddess in animal form or riding animals. A beautiful analysis of the development of this idea of a Witches Sabbath and the religious background of these shamanic practises can be found in Carlo Ginzburg's book Ecstasies.

In the following we will list some of the basic facts about the Great Witch Hunt, which is often confused with the great heresy trials and the crusades against heretics that preceded it. Together these constitute the Burning Times.

Remember that the Burning Times lasted for 500+ years (1200-1750) and took place in the whole of non-Orthodox Europe. Any sweeping statement about this period is bound to be a simplification with many exceptions.

The Great Witch Hunt did not take place in the middle ages, but started in the 16th century, i.e. after the rediscovery of America. Its development started at the end of the 15th century in the western Alps, i.e., the Savoie and the north of Italy. The same region (and the Mid-South of France) had seen earlier mass persecutions of Lepers, Jews, and Heretics. But only around 1500 all the ingredients of the Witch Mass Hysteria came together and spread around Europe.

The Great Hunt really took off only after 1600 and most people were executed between 1600 and 1750. The last victim in Europe was Anna Göldi, who was convicted in 1782 in the Swiss town of Glarus.

Note that this is the age of Descartes, Newton, and Leibnitz and the colonization of the Americas.

Before the Great Witch Hunt, in Medieval times, individual witches or members of specific, heterodox, movements were tried before inquisitory courts, because they were considered heretics, or were accused of specific crimes (e.g., treason, murder attempts). Being a witch or sorceror was never more than instrumental to the crime in these times, although it could be used as incriminating evidence.

Considering the low quality of the legal system in these Pre-Hunt times, the trials can be considered reasonably effective and efficient in squelching heterodox movements and practises in blood. That is to say, a lot of those convicted were indeed heretics or sorcerors. It must be remembered that magick was considered on a par with any other useful craft.

During the Great Witch Hunt, any relation between the "guilt" of the accused and the outcome of the trial was lost.

Other groups, like Lepers and Jews faced bouts of horrible persecutions (and mass executions) that showed all the signs of the witch hunts, except that these were readily identifiable marginalized people.

During the Great Hunt, witches were accused of "impractical" and "traceless" crimes. They had intercourse with the devil and various demons at unlikely places and times. "Unregistered" babies from hidden pregnancies (i.e., no known babies were missing) were sacrificed and/or eaten, with no remains ever found. Sacred objects of unspecified origin were spoiled and misused. Global disasters were caused that brought no profit whatsoever to the accused, e.g., hail, caterpillars, droughts, floods, plagues. All in all, accusations were identical irrespective of time and place of the trial, but no solid evidence ever turned up.

Furthermore, the conspiracy of the witches was always boundless. The number of people thought to be involved could reach really absurd proportions. For instance, in 1609, the witch hunting French official Pierre de Lancre was convinced that all 30,000 inhabitants of Labourd, a Basque speaking region in the SW of France, were witches, priests included. He

actually tried to execute all inhabitants and tortured and burned around 600 women and some men. He was stopped only after their male relatives returned from a fishing expedition of the coast of Newfoundland and started a revolt after which the Bishop of Bayonne (Bertrand d'Echaux) intervened. De Lancre was not tried or imprisoned after this feat but lived to an old age and was proud of his achievements.

Incidentally, the people who had fled to Logrono, in the Spanish part of Navarra, for safety, triggered a true witch hunt there. Hundreds of people were tried. However, the Spanish Inquisition intervened and only a few women were actually executed. As a result of this witch hunt, witch trials were prohibited in Spain (1614). What makes this case even more

remarkable was the fact that it was admitted that those that had already been executed at Logrono (1610) were innocent and the judges were arrested (not for executing innocent people, but they had acted illegally by starting the trials and executions).

Witch hunts invariably started with a departure from normal and proper legal procedures. In general, every accused person was found guilty and was executed. Whenever normal legal practises were upheld, few or no people were executed and the witch hunt died down quickly. Witch hunts were only found where central power was weak (e.g., in Germany) or indecisive (e.g., the Salem case in Northern America). Where central power was strong (e.g., Spain, The Netherlands, both South and Nord, France since Mazarin), witch hunts were prevented or stopped (1600 in the Netherlands, 1610 in Spain and Belgium, 1647 in France).

Witch hunts were often instigated and perpetuated by hysterical children, adolescents, or nuns who accused relatives (even parents) and neighbors of outrageous crimes (does this ring a bell). When these "witnesses" were steered properly, anyone could be accused of anything. When they were isolated from each other and from the prosecutor, accusations quickly became unconvincing.

Isolating these "victims" of witch crimes was often used as a method to smother raging witch hunts.

After the start of a witch hunt, any woman (or man) could be tried and executed as a witch. Sometimes, there was a serious risk that, indeed, each and every woman in the community would actually be executed (Labourd, France 1609; Fulda, 1603-1606; Offenburg, 1601-1631; Cologne, 1629-1636, Germany). Any real witch that was executed was caught only by accident. Only at the early start of a hunt were the victims the old, lonely women and mid-wives of lore. As a consequence, it is incorrect to speak of witches being executed during these witch hunts.

The most reliable estimations of the number of people killed during the witch hunts are (well) below the 1,000,000 mark. The actual number of documented executions is generally considered to be under 100,000. The difference between these two numbers is the (very unreliable) estimated number of lost reports.

Only a fraction of the victims of witch hunts were men, mostly those who tried to protect women or who resisted the witch hunters. By far the most victims were made in what is now Germany. A German witch hunt could kill hundreds in a single city (250 in Fulda, 1603-1606; 900 in Bamberg and 1200 in Würzburg 1627-1631).

Note that 1,000,000 executions in 2 centuries (1550-1750) would mean 5000 executions a year: almost all of which had to take place in Germany, France, and England

The Catholic church was very sympathetic with those who hunted witches, but was not actually involved in the hunts. However, officials of the Catholic church occasionally were involved both in starting witch hunts and in terminating them. Occasionally, priests and nuns were even victims of the hunts.

Do note, that the Spanish Inquisition executed people by the thousands, but not because they were witches, only because they were heretics or (converted) Jews (actually, around 1600 only 1-1.5% of those tried were sorcerors or witches). As a result, only few witch hunts were reported from Italy, Spain and the Spanish Netherlands (i.e., Belgium). There were probably not as much people executed in witch hunts led by Protestants as were in hunts led by Catholics but the believe in witches was not less in the protestant regions.

Note: in Orthodox and Islamic countries, no proper witch hunts have ever taken place

Witch trials were mob justice, steered by genuine believers, opportunists and demagogues. The man in the street actually believed in a conspiracy of the devil to destroy the Christian world. No matter how many they had killed, witch hunters were never brought to justice (not quite, there are two or three exceptions, e.g., Balthasar Ross, Fulda, Germany 1603-1606; the witch-judges in Logrono, Spain 1610). Any freed suspects often had to move away for fear of being lynched by their neighbors.

Note that the possessions of convicted witches were often confiscated and the hunters would get their share, fueling their efforts.

Doing Magick was not considered particularly relevant for being tried as a witch. Male practitioners of Magick, even Black Magick, were never bothered.

Witch Hunts are very common in modern history, although never with as devastating results as during the Great Witch Hunt. For instance, the hunt for communist infiltration in the USA in the 1950s had all features of a real witch hunt: special trials that departed from the normal legal procedures, mob justice, unrealistic accusations, indiscriminate convictions.

The recent upheaval about Satanic groups had everything in it to become a real witch hunt, except that no departure from the normal legal procedures was allowed. This last point proved crucial. Only few people were actually convicted and the whole movement died down for lack of success.