

# Recent Developments in the Study of The Great European Witch Hunt

by Jenny Gibbons

(abridged)



Since the late 1970's, a quiet revolution has taken place in the study of historical witchcraft and the Great European Witch Hunt. Many theories which reigned supreme thirty years ago have vanished, swept away by a flood of new data. Unfortunately, little of the new information has made it into popular history.

## Beyond the National Enquirer

What was this revolution? Starting in the mid-1970's, historians stopped relying on witch-hunting propaganda and began to base their theories on thorough, systematic studies of all the witch trials in a particular area. Ever since the Great Hunt itself, we've relied on witch hunters' propaganda: witch hunting manuals, sermons against witchcraft, and lurid pamphlets on the more sensational trials. Everyone knew that this evidence was lousy. Better evidence did exist. Courts that tried witches kept records -- trial verdicts, lists of confiscated goods, questions asked during interrogations, and the answers witches gave. But trial data had one daunting drawback: there was too much of it. Witch trials were scattered amongst literally millions of other trials from this period. For most historians, it was too much work to wade through this mass of data.

## The New Geography of Witch Hunting

The pattern revealed by trial records bears little resemblance to the picture literature painted. If your knowledge of the "Burning Times" is based on popular literature, nearly everything you know may be wrong.

a) **Chronology.** Popular history places the witchcraft persecutions in the Middle Ages (5<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries). Nineteenth century historians considered the Great Hunt an outburst of superstitious hysteria, fostered and spread by the Catholic Church. "Naturally", therefore, the persecution would be worst when the Church's power was the greatest: in the Middle Ages. Modern research has debunked this theory quite conclusively. The lethal

crazes of the Great Hunt were actually the child of the "Age of Reason." Etienne Leon de Lamothe-Langon's forged trials [*Histoire de l'Inquisition en France*, 1829, purporting to describe enormous witch trials in southern France in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century – the most infamous involving 400 women killed in one day] were one of the last stumbling blocks that kept the theory of medieval witch hunting alive. [In 1972 two scholars, Norman Cohn and Richard Kieckhefer, working independently discovered that these trials never happened]

All pre-modern European societies [Roman, Germanic and Celtic] believed in magic. As far as we can tell, all passed laws prohibiting magical crimes. This is only common sense: a society that believes in the power of magic will punish people who abuse that power. Many of the stereotypes about witches have been with us from pre-Christian times. From the Mediterranean to Ireland, witches were said to fly about at night, drinking blood, killing babies, and devouring human corpses. We know this because many early Christian missionaries encouraged newly converted kingdoms to pass laws protecting men and women from charges of witchcraft -- charges, they said, were impossible and un-Christian. For example, the 5<sup>th</sup> century Synod of St. Patrick ruled that "A Christian who believes that there is a vampire in the world, that is to say, a witch, is to be anathematized; whoever lays that reputation upon a living being shall not be received into the Church until he revokes with his own voice the crime that he has committed."

The Church also forbade magic and assigned relatively mild penalties to convicted witches. For instance, the Confessional of Egbert (England, 950-1000 CE) said that "If a woman works witchcraft and enchantment and [uses] magical philters, she shall fast [on bread and water] for twelve months.... If she kills anyone by her philters, she shall fast for seven years."

Traditional attitudes towards witchcraft began to change in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, at the very end of the Middle Ages. As Carlo Ginzburg noted (*Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbat*), early 14<sup>th</sup> century central Europe was seized by a series of rumor-panics. After the terrible devastation caused by the Black Death (1347-1349) these rumors increased in intensity and focused primarily on witches and "plague-spreaders." Witchcraft cases increased slowly but steadily from the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century. The first mass trials appeared in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Around 1550 the persecution skyrocketed. What we think of as "the Burning Times" -- the crazes, panics, and mass hysteria -- largely occurred in one century, from 1550-1650. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Great Hunt passed nearly as suddenly as it had arisen. Trials dropped sharply after 1650 and disappeared completely by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

b) **Geography.** When all trials are plotted on a map surprising patterns emerge. First, the trials were intensely sporadic. The rate of witch hunting varied dramatically throughout Europe, ranging from a high of 26,000 deaths in Germany to a low of 4 in Ireland. Some of the most enormous persecutions (like the panics of Wurzburg, Germany) occurred next to areas that had virtually no trials whatsoever.

Second, the trials were concentrated in central Europe, in Germany, Switzerland, and eastern France. The further you got away from that area, the lower the persecution generally got.

Third, the height of the persecution occurred during the Reformation, when the formerly unified Christian Church shattered into Catholic and Protestant sects. In countries like Italy and Spain, where the Catholic Church and its Inquisition reigned virtually unquestioned, witch hunting was uncommon. The worst panics took place in areas like Switzerland and Germany, where rival Christians sects fought to impose their religious views on each other.

Fourth, panics clustered around borders. France's major crazes occurred on its Spanish and eastern fronts. Italy's worst persecution was in the northern regions. Spain's one craze centered on the Basque lands straddling the French/Spanish border.

Fifth, although it has become commonplace to think of the outbreaks of witch hunting as malevolent pogroms imposed by evil elites, in reality the worst horrors occurred where central authority had broken down. Germany and Switzerland were patchwork quilts, loose confederacies stitched together from dozens of independent political units. England, which had a strong government, had little witch hunting. The country's one and only craze took place during the English Civil War, when the government's power collapsed. A strong, unified national church (as in Spain and Italy) also tended to keep deaths to a minimum. Strong governments didn't always slow witch hunting, as King James of Scotland proved. But the worst panics definitely hit where both Church and State were weak.

c) ***Christianity's Role in the Persecution.*** For years, the responsibility for the Great Hunt has been dumped on the Catholic Church's door-step. Nineteenth century historians ascribed the persecution to religious hysteria. And when Margaret Murray proposed that witches were members of a Pagan sect [*The Witch Cult in Western Europe* and *The God of the Witches*], popular writers trumpeted that the Great Hunt was not a mere panic, but rather a deliberate attempt to exterminate Christianity's rival religion.

Today, we know that there is absolutely no evidence to support this theory. When the Church was at the height of its power (11<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries) very few witches died. Persecutions did not reach epidemic levels until after the Reformation, when the Catholic Church had lost its position as Europe's indisputable moral authority. Moreover most of the killing was done by secular courts. Church courts tried many witches but they usually imposed non-lethal penalties. A witch might be excommunicated, given penance, or imprisoned, but she was rarely killed. The Inquisition almost invariably pardoned any witch who confessed and repented.

The vast majority of witches were condemned by secular courts. Ironically, the worst courts were local courts. "Community-based" courts were often virtual slaughterhouses, killing 90% of all accused witches. National courts condemned only about 30% of the accused. Why were the execution rates so vastly different? Civil courts tended to handle "black" witchcraft cases, trials involving charges of magical murder, arson, and other violent crimes. Church courts tried more "white" witchcraft: cases of magical healing, divination, and protective magic. Trial evidence shows that courts always treated healing more leniently than cursing. Additionally, secular and religious courts served two different purposes. Civil courts "protected" society by punishing and killing convicted criminals. In theory, the Church's court system was designed to "save" the criminal -- to make him or her a good Christian once more. Only unrepentant sinners were to be executed.

The differences between local and national courts are also easy to explain. Witchcraft cases were usually surrounded by general fear and public protests. "Community-based" courts drew their officials from the community, the group of people affected by this panic. National courts had more distance from the hysteria. Moreover national courts tended to have professional, trained staff -- men who were less likely to discard important legal safeguards in their haste to see "justice" done.

d) ***The Inquisition.*** But what of the Inquisition? For many, the "Inquisition" and the "Burning Times" are virtually synonymous. The myth of the witch-hunting inquisition was built on several assumptions and mistakes. First, the myth was the logical extension of 19th century history, which blamed the persecutions on the Catholic Church. If the Church attacked witches, surely the Inquisition would be the hammer She wielded.

Second, a common translation error muddied the waters. Many records simply said that a witch was tried "by inquisition". Some writers assumed that this meant "the" Inquisition. And in some cases it did. But an "inquisition" was also the name of a type of trial used by almost all courts in Europe at the time. Later, when historians examined the records in greater detail, they found that the majority did not involve the Inquisition, merely an inquisition.

Third, the only witch-hunting manual most people have seen was written by an inquisitor. The *Malleus Maleficarum* (Hammer of Witches) was the only manual readily available in translation. Authors naively assumed that the book painted an accurate picture of how the Inquisition tried witches. Heinrich Kramer, the text's demented author, was held up as a typical inquisitor. His rather stunning sexual preoccupations were presented as the Church's "official" position on witchcraft. Actually the Inquisition immediately rejected the legal procedures Kramer recommended and censured the inquisitor himself just a few years after the *Malleus* was published. Secular courts, not inquisitorial ones, resorted to the *Malleus*.

As more research was done and historians became more sensitive to the "an inquisition/the Inquisition" error, the inquisitorial witch-hunter began to look like a rare bird. Lamothe-Langon's trials were the last great piece of "evidence", and when they fell, scholars re-examined the Inquisition's role in the Burning Times. What they found was quite startling. In 1258 Pope Alexander IV explicitly refused to allow the Inquisition from investigating charges of witchcraft: "The Inquisitors, deputed to investigate heresy, must not intrude into investigations of divination or sorcery without knowledge of manifest heresy involved." The gloss on this passage explained what "manifest heresy" meant: "praying at the altars of idols, to offer sacrifices, to consult demons, to elicit responses from them... or if [the witches] associate themselves publicly with heretics." In other words, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century the Church did not consider witches heretics or members of a rival religion.

It wasn't until 1326, almost 100 years later, that the Church reversed its position and allowed the Inquisition to investigate witchcraft. But the only significant contribution that was made was in the development of "demonology", the theory of the diabolic origin of witchcraft. As John Tedeschi demonstrates in his essay "Inquisitorial Law and the Witch" (in Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen's *Early Modern European Witchcraft*) the Inquisition still played a very small role in the persecution. From 1326-1500, few deaths occurred.

Richard Kieckhefer (*European Witch Trials*) found 702 definite executions in all of Europe from 1300-1500; of these, only 137 came from inquisitorial or church courts. By the time that trials were common (early 16<sup>th</sup> century) the Inquisition focused on the proto-Protestants. When the trials peaked in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Inquisition was only operating in two countries: Spain and Italy, and both had extremely low death tolls.

In fact, in Spain the Inquisition worked diligently to keep witch trials to a minimum. Around 1609, a French witch-craze triggered a panic in the Basque regions of Spain. Gustav Henningsen (*The Witches' Advocate*) documented the Inquisition's work in brilliant detail. Although several inquisitors believed the charges, one skeptic convinced *La Suprema* (the ruling body of the Spanish Inquisition) that this was groundless hysteria. *La Suprema* responded by issuing an "Edict of Silence" forbidding all discussion of witchcraft, for "There were neither witches nor bewitched until they were talked and written about."

The Edict worked, quickly dissipating the panic and accusations. And until the end of the Great Hunt, the Spanish Inquisition insisted that it alone had the right to condemn witches - which it refused to do. Another craze broke out in Vizcaya, in 1616. When the Inquisition re-issued the Edict of Silence, the secular authorities went over their head and petitioned the king for the right to try witches themselves. The king granted the request, and 289 people were quickly sentenced. Fortunately the Inquisition managed to re-assert its monopoly on trials and dismissed all the charges. The "witches" of Catalonia were not so lucky. Secular authorities managed to execute 300 people before the Inquisition could stop the trials.

e) ***The Witches.*** Court records showed that there was no such thing as an "average" witch: there was no characteristic that the majority of witches shared, in all times and places. Not gender. Not wealth. Not religion. Nothing. The only thing that united them was the fact that they were accused of witchcraft. The diversity of witches is one of the strongest arguments against the theory that the Great Hunt was a deliberate pogrom aimed at a specific group of people. If that were true, then most witches would have something in common.

We can isolate certain factors that increased a person's odds of being accused. Most witches were women. Many were poor or elderly; many seem to be unmarried. Most were alienated from their neighbors, or seen as "different" and disliked. But there is no evidence that one group was targeted.

Before trial evidence was available, there were two major theories on who the witches were. Margaret Murray proposed that witches were members of a Pagan sect that worshipped the Horned God. Murray's research was exceptionally poor, and occasionally skated into out-right textual manipulation. She restricted her studies to our worst evidence: witch hunting propaganda and trials that involved copious amounts of torture. She then assumed that such evidence was basically accurate, and that the Devil was "really" a Pagan god. None of these assumptions have held up under scrutiny.

In 1973, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English suggested that most witches were midwives and female healers. Their book *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses* convinced many

feminists and Pagans that the Great Hunt was a pogrom aimed at traditional women healers. The evidence for this theory was -- and is -- completely anecdotal. Authors cited a number of cases involving healers, then simply assumed that this was what the "average" trial was like. Healers made up a small percentage of the accused, usually between 2% and 20%, depending on the country. In 1990, D. Harley's article, "Historians as demonologists: the myth of the midwife-witch" (in *Social History of Medicine* 3 (1990), pp. 1-26.) demonstrated that being a licensed midwife actually decreased a woman's chances of being charged.

And there was worse to come. Feminist and Pagan writers presented the healer-witch as the innocent, enlightened victim of the evil male witch hunters. Trials showed that as often as not, the "white" witch was an avid supporter of the "Burning Times." Diane Purkiss (*The Witch in History*) pointed out that "midwives were more likely to be found helping witch-hunters" than as victims of their inquiries. How did witches become witch-hunters? By blaming illnesses on their rivals.

f) **Gender Issues.** One basic fact about the Great Witch Hunt stands out: most of the people accused were women. Even during the Hunt itself, commentators noticed this. Later, the predominance of women led some feminists to theorize that "witch" and "woman" were virtually synonymous, that the persecution was caused by Europe's misogyny.

Overall, approximately 75%-80% of the accused were women. However this percentage varied dramatically. In several of the Scandinavian countries, equal numbers of men and women were accused. In Iceland over 90% of the accused were men. Central Europe killed the most witches, and it killed many more women than men -- this is why the overall percentages are so badly skewed.

Proponents of the misogyny theory generally ignore these variations. One of the most egregious examples comes from Anne Llewellyn Barstow's *Witchcraze*. Barstow says that Iceland did not have a "real" witch hunt. Now, Iceland killed more witches than Ireland, Russia, and Portugal combined. Barstow claims that all these countries had "real" hunts, and offers no explanation of what made Iceland's deaths "unreal." The only thing I can see is that almost all Icelandic witches were men, and Barstow's theory cannot handle that.

Given the sexism of the times, it's not difficult to find shockingly misogynist witch trials. But misogyny does not explain the trial patterns we see. The beginning and end of the persecution don't correlate to any notable shifts in women's rights. Trials clustered around borders -- are borders more misogynist than interior regions? Ireland killed four witches, Scotland a couple thousand -- are the Scots that much more sexist?

## From Nine Million to Forty Thousand

The most dramatic changes in our vision of the Great Hunt centered on the death toll. Back before trial surveys were available, estimates of the death toll were almost 100% pure speculation. So early death toll estimates, which ranged from several hundred thousand up

to a high of nine million, were simply people trying to guess how much "a lot" of witches was.

Today, the process is completely different. Historians begin by counting all the executions/trials listed in an area's court records. Next they estimate how much evidence we've lost: what years and courts we're missing data for. Finally they survey the literary evidence, to see if any large witch trials occurred during the gaps in the evidence. There's still guesswork involved in today's estimates and many areas have not yet been systematically studied. But we now have a solid database to build our estimates from, and our figures are getting more specific as further areas are studied.

When the first trial record studies were completed, it was obvious that early estimates were fantastically high. Trial evidence showed that witch crazes were not everyday occurrences, as literature suggested. In fact most countries only had one or two in all of the Great Hunt.

To date, less than 15,000 definite executions have been discovered in all of Europe and America combined. Even though many records are missing, it is now clear that death tolls higher than 100,000 are not believable.

Three scholars have attempted to calculate the total death toll for the Great Hunt using the new evidence. Brian Levack (*The Witch Hunt in Early Modern Europe*) surveyed regional studies and found that there were approximately 110,000 witch trials. Levack focused on recorded trials, not executions, because in many cases we have evidence that a trial occurred but no indication of its outcome. On average, 48% of trials ended in an execution, therefore he estimated that 60,000 witches died. This is slightly higher than 48% to reflect the fact that Germany, the center of the persecution, killed more than 48% of its witches.

Ronald Hutton (*The Pagan Religions of the British Isles* and "Counting the Witch Hunt", an unpublished essay) used a different methodology. First he surveyed the regional studies and counted up the number of estimated deaths they contained. When he ran into an uncounted area, he looked for a counted area which matched it as closely as possible, in terms of population, culture, and the intensity of witch hunting mentioned in literary evidence. He then assumed that the uncounted area would kill roughly as many witches as the counted area. Using this technique, he estimated that 40,000 witches died in the Great Hunt.

Anne Llewellyn Barstow (*Witchcraze*) estimated that 100,000 witches died, but her reasoning was flawed. Barstow began with Levack's 60,000 deaths. Then she increased it to 100,000 for two reasons: 1) To compensate for lost records; and 2) Because new trials are still being found. This may sound reasonable, but it's not. The 110,000 estimated witch trials that Levack based his calculations on already did contain a large allowance for lost records. Her point about new trials is true, but irrelevant. Yes, more deaths are being discovered each year. But the more we find, the lower the death toll goes. This makes sense once you understand how historians make their estimates. "New" trials aren't trials we never dreamed existed. They appear when we count areas and courts that haven't been counted before. Historians have always known that our data was imperfect, and they always

included estimates for lost trials. So when you find "new" executions, you can't simply add them to the total death toll: you also have to subtract the old estimate they're replacing. And since old estimates were generally far too high, newly "found" trials usually end up lowering the death toll.

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