Witchcraft and Magic in Europe

Athlone Press's Six-Volume History Unravels Neopagan Mythology

by George Franklin

Ever wonder what really happened during the Burning Times, and why the European witch-hunts occurred when and where they did?

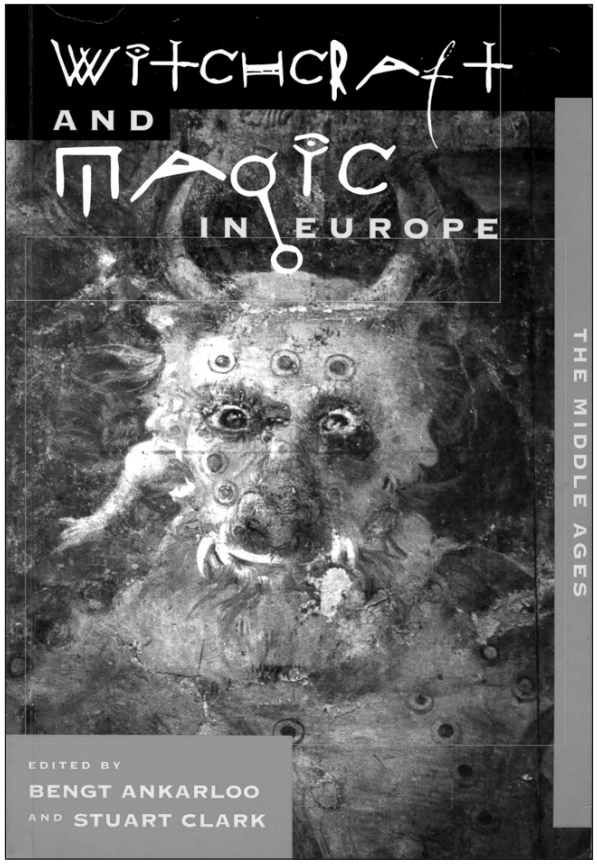
Who were the New Order of the Golden Dawn and the Theosophists, and how did they shape our practices today?

What did Aleister Crowley, Margaret Murray, and Gerald Gardner contribute, and where did they get their inspirations and training?

Where did the European concepts of "witch" and "magician" arise, and how have they evolved over the centuries?

More chilling, how were witches and magicians steadily demonized from Ancient times, until in the Burning Times magical practitioners were routinely accused of (and tortured into confessing to) a satanic conspiracy against Christendom?

Finally, how is it that after centuries of repression and/or ridicule, magic and witchcraft are flourishing today?



Demolishing Our Mythology

For those of us who stay awake at night wondering about such things, Athlone Press's six-volume history of magic and witchcraft (published in the U.S. by the University of Pennsylvania Press) sets a new standard in pagan scholarship.

The essays collected in these volumes survey the scholarly terrain around the year 2000, and pretty well demolish dozens of favorites myths and legends that have accrued over the years.

Whether the authors are challenging past exaggerations of the number of witch executions (a maximum of about 40,000 deaths in all of Europe is suggested, with the majority found in Post-Reformation Germany), or debunking the magical and scholarly claims of venerable elders such as Gerald Gardner or Margaret Murray, these essays are a sober and meticulous reassessment of our heritage.

Footnotes abound, but most of the essays are quite readable. The box on the next page offers a plan for reading most of the series. Each essay stands alone, and they can be read in any order.

What — No Tarot?

Even in six volumes, gaps are evident. Renaissance magic gets short shrift, and astrology and tarot are barely mentioned. Russia seems not to be considered a part of Europe.

Of more concern, the essays focus so narrowly on their given topics and

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geographical boundaries that it can be difficult to see witches and magic in their wider context.

For instance, Volume Four does a great job establishing a factual basis for the new estimate of witch-executions during the "Burning Times" (current estimates, based on painstaking analysis of church and secular records, vary from about 30-40,000 total witch-deaths for all of Europe).

But I wonder how this compares with executions of, say, heretics or pickpockets? The scant evidence offered suggests that witchcraft was one of numerous "moral offenses," and generally not the most pressing to authorities.

Witch-hunts – Complex Patterns

Why, during one era (yet at strikingly different times in the various regions of Europe), was witch-hunting suddenly an obsession for church and state authorities as well as common people?

The essays covering the organized witch-hunts (roughly 1500-1750 — the Early Modern Era in Europe, not the much-reviled Middle Ages) show the complex interplay between popular persecutions, small-village scape-goating, and church and secular authorities.

Why witches became targets precisely at this moment remains somewhat a mystery. Yet these volumes offer a coherent picture of the progressive demonization of magic and witchcraft, tracing the issue from ancient Greece and Rome through the Burning Times and showing how the notion of a "satanic conspiracy" evolved from diverse sources to become, around 1500, the "hammer of witches."

Exacerbated by the strained religious situation in the century after the

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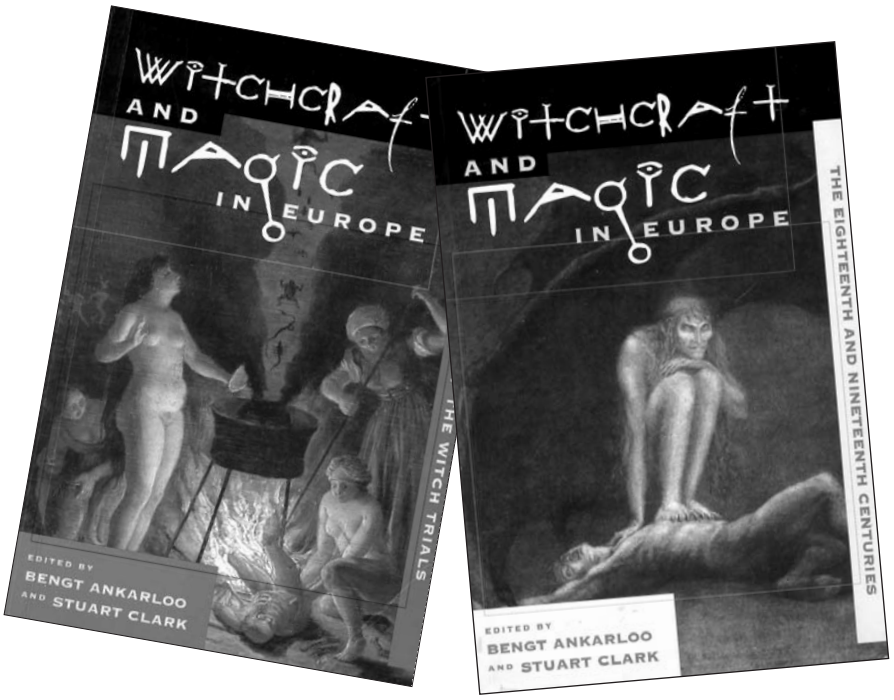

Reading the Athlone Series

The Athlone series consists of focused essays, each under 100 pages. Most are quite readable, and some are fascinating.

A great introduction to the series is Ronald Hutton's "Modern Pagan Witchcraft" in Volume Six, which traces neopagan history from the late 1800s to the present. Hutton shows how groups like the Theosophists, folklore societies, and the Golden Dawn, as well as individuals such as Aleister Crowley, Margaret Murray, and Gerald Gardner, created the forms and practices that evolved into contemporary witchcraft.

Volume Four covers the peak period of the witch trials, surveying the intensive research of the past 30-40 years and drastically revising our understanding of this period.

The second essay of Volume Two is a short "biography" of every witch, magician, wonder-worker, or sorcerer mentioned in ancient literature, including Circe, Solomon, Appollonius of Tyana, and Jesus of Nazareth.

Here's a suggested plan for reading most of the series, skipping the more specialized essays. Start with the second essay of Volume II:

Volume II.2 — Witches and Sorcerers in Classical Literature

Volume II.3 — Imagining Greek and Roman Magic

Volume II.4 — The Demonization of Magic in Late Antiquity

Volume III.1 — Medieval Magic: Definitions, Beliefs, Practices

Volume III.3 — Medieval Church and State on Magic and Witchcraft

Volume IV.1 — Witch Trials in Continental Europe

Volume IV.2 — Witch Trials in Northern Europe

Volume IV.3 — Witchcraft and Magic in Early Modern Europe

Volume V.1 — The Decline and End of Witchcraft Prosecutions

Volume V.2 — Witchcraft After the Witch Trials

Volume V.3 — Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment, Romantic, and Liberal Thought

Volume VI.1 — Modern Pagan Witchcraft

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Protestant Reformation, this demonization led to a climate where witches were seen as the "devil's apprentices" — a belief not widely held before this era.

Broad conclusions suggest that the common denominator of many hunts was a weak central government and/or judicial system.

Thus decentralized and politically chaotic Germany was the source of over half of all executions, while more stable and centralized France and England ended their hunts earlier and with far fewer deaths.

One interesting finding of the detailed archival studies conducted over the past half-century is that the Spanish and Roman Inquisitions, far from instigating systematic witch-hunts, generally played a tempering role.

Organized witch-hunts ended far earlier in Inquisition-dominated areas than in Protestant Germany and Scandinavia, due largely to the Inquisition's insistence on strict judicial procedure and evidence rules.

As to who the witches were, and who was targeted by the witch-hunters, the variation across Europe is so great that no summary is possible beyond the fact that women were accused and executed more often than men in most places. The essays in Volumes 4 offer succinct surveys of these divergent and fascinating patterns.

Neopagan Roots and Seeds

Volume Six features Ronald Hutton's essay on Modern Pagan Witchcraft.

Hutton, whose outstanding late-1990s book *The Triumph of the Moon* covers this material in more detail, traces neopagan roots from Freemasons and Spiritualists, through predecessor groups such as the Theosophists (who acquainted Europeans with Indian philosophy) and the Golden Dawn (assemblers of the framework of modern pagan rituals), on to the mid-20th century revival inspired by Gerald Gardner, Doreen Valiente, Aleister Crowley, and others.

In the process, Hutton takes a certain delight in uncovering the highly-fictionalized biographies of a number of our honored ancestors.

According to Hutton and other recent researchers, virtually every well-known neopagan author and magus of the later 1800s and the first half of the 1900s fabricated significant parts of their credentials, often in attempts to provide a "hallowed antiquity" to their innovative reconstructions of paganism.

Some of the fictions are easily unveiled, such as the Golden Dawn's claims to derive its organizing structure from a committee of "secret chiefs" living in the Himalayas amd directing global esoteric efforts.

Others, such as Gardner's claims of advanced academic degrees and secret initiations, took more determined research to uncover. Yet in the end, these too fall under Hutton's skeptical blade.

The result is a bit sad. But like a glass of cold water, it clears the palate for whatever comes next. Any future claims of recently-discovered

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Origins of Our Practices

Ronald Hutton and others have traced sources for some of our favorite practices and turns of phrase. Here are the oldest occurrences the authors have traced (from Athlone Volumes 5-6):

"So mote it be" — Scottish Freemason expression from about 1700.

Image of the witch as leader of popular resistance — *La Sorciere,* by Jules Michelet, 1862.

Watchtowers of the four directions — John Dee's "Enochian" Magic, c. 1600.

Elemental tool associations (air = dagger, fire = wand, water = chalice, earth = pentacle) — Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, c. 1890.

Earliest mention of "millions of witches burned" — *Medica Sacra,* by Richard Mead, 1755. The Athlone series puts European witch-hunt executions at around 40,000 deaths.

Drawing-down deities ("aspecting," in our terms) — Samuel L. Mathers of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, c. 1896, imaginatively recreating ancient Mediterranean practices.

"Coven" as a term for an assembly of witches — Scottish term from 1660s, brought into English usage by novelist Sir Walter Scott around 1830.

"Neopaganism" as a descriptive term — W.F. Barry, in *The Quarterly Review,* 1891. Barry and other Christian critics used the term to belittle the growing interest in reviving ancient paganism.

The Triple Goddess (Maiden, Mother, Crone) — proposed by Cambridge professor Jane Ellen Harrison, 1903; and propounded by James Frazer in later editions of *The Golden Bough* (final edition 1922). The intent was that a single Great Goddess lay behind the countless manifestations of specific goddesses, whose diversity could be reduced to one of the three age-related aspects of the over-arching Triple Goddess.

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manuscripts, secret intiations, and the like will sound hollow.

American Oversights

Hutton is less successful in dealing with North American witchcraft. His best research depends on personal trust and communications. This web breaks down when he ventures across the Atlantic, where he seems to rely on cursory readings of a few popular texts.

Thus he (grudgingly) gives California witches such as Z Budapest and Starhawk their due, but he treats them as eccentric authors, seemingly unaware that a group like Reclaiming even exists.

Which is too bad for all parties. Someone send the guy an Avalon Witchcamp flyer and clue him in.

Bruised egos aside, let's not return the favor by pretending that Hutton doesn't exist. His work is the standard by which subsequent histories will be measured, and he deserves to be carefully read as we gather the threads of our tradition.

The North American tradition is given a more sympathetic reading by authors such as Helen Berger and Owen Davies — see "More Neopagan History" on this page.

Postmodern Magic

In the finest postmodern tradition, many authors in the Athlone series include "methodological" sections where they puzzle over what exactly they are writing about.

The consensus seems to be a structuralist paradigm in which "magic" is defined as "whatever religion and science are not."

Through 2500 years of Western culture, magic has shown such incredible resiliency in the face of persecution and marginalization that it seems as if "magic" is necessary to the definition of key Western concepts such as "science" and "religion."

After all, any religion worth its credo must have heresies and blasphemies to combat. To paraphrase Voltaire, if witches and magic didn't exist, the church would have to invent them.

Which it fairly well did, judging from lunatic texts such as the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum* — just one of a thriving genre of witch-hunt

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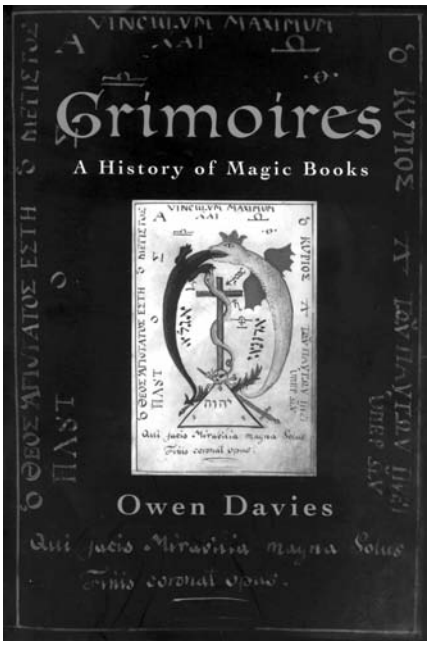
More Neopagan History

Here are some recent works on pagan, neopagan, and magical history, plus an outstanding web resource where you can find many old magical texts in PDF format.

The Triumph of the Moon, by Ronald Hutton. Hutton's full-length treatment of neopagan history. Opinionated but carefully documented, particularly concerning the British background. This will be the standard text for a generation.

Grimoires: A History of Magic Books, by Owen Davies. Respected social historian Davies turns his meticulous gaze to grimoires and "books of shadows," and in the process uncovers the hidden history of pulp literature. Entertaining and informative.



Witchcraft and Magic, edited by Helen Berger (2005). A half-dozen essays surveying various Earth-based practices, including New Age, Wiccan, and Feminist strands.

Religions of the Helenistic-Roman Age, by Antonia Tripolitis (2002). Short essays on the Mystery Cults, Mithraism, Hellenistic Judaism, and early Christianity. Dry but interesting survey of paganism before Christian dominance.

Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism, by Kurt Rudolph (1977). This careful study of the Nag Hammadi and other texts paints a complex picture of late-Roman gnosticism — a spiritual tradition without a centralized authority or dogma whose anti-material tendencies still echo today.

Enchanted Feminism: Ritual, Gender and Divinity Among the Reclaiming Witches, by Jone Salomonsen (2002). Salomonsen's groundbreaking study of the Reclaiming tradition of witchcraft.

Esoteric Archives — www.esotericarchives.com, coordinated by Joseph H. Peterson, is an incredible online compendium of grimoires and other magical texts. Agrippa, Trimethius, Paracelsus, Dee, Bruno, and more, all available for free download.

Is this a golden age, or what?

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manuals, seconded by lurid popular tracts detailing the horrible crimes of witches. Add a dash of torture so that the confessions matched the propaganda, and the witch-hunts appeared justified.

Through European history there have been intentional practitioners of magic, witchcraft, sorcery, and diabolism. But during the witch-hunt era their numbers and powers were never a threat to organized religion or public morals, and many executed "witches" had no connection to these practices. The demonization of witchcraft and "learned magic" served less to cleanse Christianity than to justify rampages of scapegoating violence (hardly the only instance in European history).

By showing how "magic" as a negative category is essential to the definitions of religion and science, the structuralist view offers an explanation of the survival of magic and witchcraft to the present day — although today's witches are more likely to run afoul of scientific than religious orthodoxy, and more likely to suffer ridicule than torture.

What seems beyond any easy explanation, certainly on the narrow scale of these essays, is why witchcraft and magic today are not simply surviving, but flourishing.

In the end, it is this flowering which gives such rich meaning to the Athlone series and the wave of new studies of magic. These books are not just "history" — they are the living source of our own practices.

George Franklin reads history books while commuting at high speeds under the San Francisco Bay. He was Associate Chamberlain of the Revolutionary Pagan Workers Vanguard until the last purge.