



# OUR MAGICAL ANCESTORS

## RECLAIMING OUR TANGLED ROOTS

One section from Luke Hauser's essay – free download at [WeaveAndSpin.org/history](http://WeaveAndSpin.org/history)

How did we get here? Where are we coming from? What are the origins of our beliefs and practices?

This 40-page illustrated essay examines familiar and obscure sources ranging from magical to political to cultural, looking at what each has bequeathed (intentionally or otherwise) to modern practicing Pagans.

The main essay, in seven sections, surveys our magical and spiritual roots from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia to Gerald Gardner and Marija Gimbutas.

A second essay looks at activist and cultural roots that fed into Reclaiming and other pagan-activist circles.

### The European Witch Hunts

Featured here is a survey of the witch hunts of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries – the Burning Times.

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Essay is included in the forthcoming *Dancing the Spiral* – info and free download of latest draft at [WeaveAndSpin.org/spiral](http://WeaveAndSpin.org/spiral)



*The Conjuror, by Hieronymus Bosch in one his more restrained moments.*

**“Erudite, good-humoured, generous, with that open-minded readiness to recognise merit in many different sources of inspiration that is one of the best features of the Reclaiming tradition.”**

*- Ronald Hutton, Professor of History,  
University of Bristol*

**“Presents an enormous amount of material in a very attractive and readable way.”**

*- Michael D. Bailey, Department of History,  
Iowa State University  
Associate Editor: Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*

# PART IV: THE EUROPEAN WITCH HUNTS

## 1450 TO 1750

### THE WITCH HUNTS

#### WHAT/WHEN/WHERE/WHY

Now we come to a disturbingly fascinating period of our history. For people who today proudly claim the title “witch” or describe their work as “magic,” as well as communists, anarchists, and activists of various stripes, the hunts and trials stand as a stark reminder of the vulnerability of people on the margins of respectability.

What led various regions and localities of Europe to engage in prolonged searches for and trials of suspected Satan-worshipping witches?

Why did the hunts happen in this period, and not earlier or later? How does it connect to a broader pattern of scapegoating that pervades Western (and perhaps much of human) history?

Who were the victims? What did they have in common? How did they try to explain themselves?

In the bibliography at the end of this article I'll recommend a short article and several longer studies which convey enough detail to illustrate the complicated and shifting patterns of the witch hunts.

Here we'll survey some of the broad outlines.

**Some numbers.** The total number killed is impossible to determine, partly because the number of alleged witches murdered by non-judicial “lynchings” can never be known. It is likely that some of the judicial witch hunts and trials began in response to lynchings, with authorities trying to re-establish control of violent situations.

However, several generations of archival research allows a general sense of the scale. Numbers in the millions, once commonly cited, are badly mistaken – in fact, impossible, given the small population of Europe at the time.

Present-day scholars, after studying trial records across the continent, put the likely total of officially executed witches at between 40 and 60 thousand over the course of about three centuries.

Of these, over half were executed in German-speaking areas between about 1550 and 1650 – the period of the worst Protestant-Catholic wars, culminating in the Thirty

Years War that raged across Germany for a generation. Central authority collapsed, and nothing reined in local scapegoating rampages.

Some of the largest documented waves of executions occurred in the western German bishoprics of Trier, Mainz, and Cologne, where several thousand people were killed over the course of just a few decades around 1600.

These mini-states lacked strong central governments, and were not subject to an appellate court. When popular opinion and local of-

icials ran amuck, there were no higher institutions to stop the momentum.

What about the Inquisition? Ironically, this disreputable body had a fairly good record during the witch hunts. The Roman Inquisition, controlled by the papacy, very early put an end to hearsay evidence and demanded that all cases follow strict legal procedures. Although some witches (and the famed magician Giordano Bruno) were subsequently executed, no major hunts ensued in the Roman jurisdiction.

Similarly, the northern half of staunchly Catholic France, with the Paris Parlement acting as a sort of supreme court, demanded around 1500 that all capital cases be sent to Paris for judicial review. No major hunts happened in their jurisdiction after this point.

Hunts seem to have happened mainly in areas where central authority was weak or compromised by war. England's



*The ducking of a witch, from a chapbook by John Ashton (1834). Image via Wikimedia Commons.*

worst period of witch-hunting was during the civil war of the 1640s. France's worst incidents were in outlying areas (Normandy, Lorraine) with no accountability to Paris.

## THE WITCH HUNTS A SATANIC CONSPIRACY?

Witchcraft had long been persecuted and punished as heresy. The final step in justifying the hunts was the growth of the idea of a satanic conspiracy to destroy Christendom.

This obsession with sects of witches – surging after 1500 – parallels the success of breakaway Protestant sects during the Reformation. Heresy was seen as a group vice, not an individual deviance. (Protestants themselves were no different, demonizing one another and the Roman church.)

Unlike earlier eras where a single person or small group was accused of using evil magic, cases after about 1500 often included charges of participating in the (sexually-charged) rituals of devil-worshipping cults, and suspects were tortured until they admitted to being part of a satanic conspiracy and named other participants.

Let's back up a bit. In the 1300s, several high-profile legal cases charged aristocrats with using magic for criminal purposes. The Order of the Knights Templar was broken up after 1307, its leaders charged with obscene magical acts.

In the Middle Ages, clerics and other educated people (mostly men) were occasionally prosecuted for magic, demonic rituals, and the like.

These upper-class cases remained isolated and did not spark hunts. When the great hunts emerged in the 1400s, the victims were overwhelmingly ordinary people – often elderly women from the fringes of society.

How did the everyday magical acts of common people get caught in this dragnet? We saw in an earlier chapter the gradual “demonization” of magic. Where older cultures saw magic as problematic only when harm was done or perceived, the later Middle Ages developed the idea that all magical acts were demonic, in that they must invoke a conscious spiritual being in order to accomplish their effects.

Did the victims actually call themselves witches? Unless they were insane, probably not. As Ronald Hutton has established, the term “witch” has in the past mainly been used on other people, not one's self. To be identified as a witch was dangerous, possibly lethal.

Initial accusations often came from neighbors and other common folk – but could rapidly expand when church and state got involved.

Working from the belief that witches (like all heretics) must belong to secret cults and sects, authorities in this period launched campaigns – both educational and

military – to eradicate heresy, deviance, and witchcraft. Official Christianity seemed under attack, and authorities looked for scapegoats.

In some ages, these scapegoats might be Jews, or Gypsies, or foreigners in general. Jews and Muslims were driven from Spain in 1492.

Starting around 1500, tensions focused on witches, and often on older women. Why this happened at this time remains a complex question to which we now turn.

## THE WITCH HUNTS WHY WERE OLDER WOMEN TARGETED?

Archival research confirms that a large majority of witches and magicians executed during the period of the great hunts were women. In some places they made up 90 percent of victims.

To account for the high percentage of women persecuted and killed during this era, it has been popular since historian Jules Michelet in the mid-1800s to cite the deep-grained misogyny of Christian churches (Protestant and Catholic) as the driving force behind the hunts.

Although Christian attitudes couldn't have helped matters, we're left wondering why the witch hunts happened around 1500 instead of, say, 500 or 1000 CE, when attitudes were just as misogynist?

Why did the Roman Inquisition lead most jurisdictions in curbing hunts? Something further must have been involved.

Social factors probably played a role. In an earlier chapter we discussed herbalism – a gendered field occupied mainly by women. In Western societies prior to about 1500, the day-to-day healthcare and healing of most people was in the hands of older women. The rare university-educated male physicians treated royalty and aristocrats (often to their detriment).

Sources from this period show that educated doctors campaigned to ban women from practicing medicine and even midwifery.

Women were also displaced from positions of economic importance as early capitalist production began to move out of home workshops and local markets.

These and other factors may have rendered older women less essential to town and village societies, and heightened gender tensions right at a moment when other conflicts and disasters were leading people across Central Europe to look for scapegoats.

For more on this complex topic, see the bibliography at the end of this essay.

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## THE WITCH HUNTS

### WHY IN THESE TIMES AND PLACES?

Why were witches particularly persecuted – and accused of a satanic conspiracy, no less – at these particular times and places? Let's focus on the century around 1550-1650 and ask – why did the worst excesses happen then, and why mainly in north-central Europe?

Factors to examine include:

- the Protestant Reformation (1517ff), which challenged centuries-old patterns of authority and spawned two centuries of religious wars.
- Christianity's centuries of demonizing magic and developing a conception of a vast anti-Christian conspiracy.
- the early stages of the capitalist upheaval, which unsettled social relations and economic patterns.
- misogynistic trends aggravated by incipient capitalism, including displacement of the home as a production site and devaluation of the role of women in production and reproduction.
- climatic trends including a "little ice age" around 1550, which led to diminished harvests.
- wider scientific and technological trends, including the development of moveable-type printing around 1450, European discovery of the Western hemisphere around 1500, and the Copernican revolution beginning around 1530.

These trends contributed to an atmosphere of displacement and unpredictable change. Place this in a "culture of misfortune" as described in an earlier section, add the religious wars in northern Europe and especially Germany beginning around 1550, and we have some possible explanations for why the trials happened when they did.

This may account for the timing – but why witches, and not, say, Jews? This was demographics. Where Jews were found in sizeable numbers, as in the city-state of Trier, they were also targeted.

Witches, on the other hand, could be found anywhere, in whatever quantities were desired.

## THE WITCH HUNTS

### HOW THEY ENDED

As noted above, the large-scale witch hunts seem to have happened mostly in areas where government authority was weak or compromised. As the worst of the religious wars wound down around 1650, central governments reasserted power.

Hunts were avoided or ended earliest in areas with strong central authority – the papal jurisdictions covered by the Roman Inquisition, the North of France covered by the Paris Parlement.

Broadly speaking, the hunts moved West to East, beginning and ending earlier in Western Europe. This parallels the earlier evolution of strong governments in the West.

Developments described later such as the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment led to growth of a general skepticism about the possibility of magic or witchcraft. By 1700, most educated Europeans considered even self-confessed witches to be deluded people incapable of doing real harm. Church authorities promoting witch hunts were considered ignorant and backward, a trope that Voltaire built his career on.

By 1750 the hunts and most official executions had ended. A new era had arrived in which magic was not persecuted, but ridiculed.

**What We Inherit:** A somewhat morbid fascination with witches

as counter-cultural icons par excellence, coupled with a realistic concern that political and religious "witch hunts" continue – not least the U.S., where a "satanic abuse" hysteria spread as recently as the 1980s (investigations turned up no actual cases.)

The anti-communist crusade around 1950 ("McCarthyism") derailed many lives and featured one of the worst aspects of witch hunts – suspects being coerced into giving the names of others.

*Complete essay at [WeaveAndSpin.org/history-ancestors](http://WeaveAndSpin.org/history-ancestors)*



*A German illustration of the Mora witch trial, Sweden 1669. Fourteen women and one man were decapitated and their bodies burned.*