

THE NEW VIEW OF THE BURNING TIMES

BY JENNY GIBBONS

EVERYTHING you “know” about the Burning Times may be wrong.

THE STUDY of historical Witchcraft has undergone a quiet revolution in the last 25 years. Today we know of perhaps 20 to 30 times as many trials as we did in the 1970s.

Previously, historians based their theories primarily on Witch-hunting propaganda, the literature written by Witch-hunters. Now, after several decades of intensive research, we have access to the views of women and the “common folk.” For the first time in history, we can “hear” what nonliterate people had to say.

Unfortunately this revolutionary information has not spread quickly. Many writers, especially nonacademic ones, continue to use old, out-of-date information. Most people are not aware that many of the things “everyone knows” about Witchcraft have been disproved in the last two decades. And so an enormous gap has opened between the scholarly and the popular views of Witchcraft.

THE REVOLUTION

Where did all this new information come from? Trial records — the documents composed by the courts that tried Witches.

Before the 1970s, historians based their theories primarily on propaganda,

the literature that Witch-hunters (and their critics) wrote. This information was easy to get hold of, and dramatic. However, it gave us a very distorted view of the Burning Times. It represented the beliefs and fears of one group only: the male, intellectual elite. And it focused on a tiny minority of trials — generally the Witch-crazes, the largest and most sensational cases.

With the advent of computer databases in the late 1970s, historians began scouring the millions of criminal trials preserved from the Burning Times, compiling enormous lists of all known Witch trials. That may not sound like much of a “revolution” but it was! For the first time we discovered what the

average Witch and Witch trial looked like. We discovered that women and the “common folk,” like the intellectual elites, were avid Witch hunters. But they didn’t accept all of the Witch-hunters’ theories. They had their own theories on what Witches were, and what they could do.

WHAT CHANGED?

The simplest answer is: everything. The Burning Times didn’t happen when or where we thought they did. They weren’t run by the people we blamed.

And while they weren’t as lethal as we’d feared, they had chilling links to a host of other atrocities throughout time.

Previously, we assumed that Witch-hunting was worst in the Middle Ages. People thought that the Church did most of the killing, and thus it stood to reason that the persecution would be the most intense when and where the Church was strongest.

But it wasn’t. Detailed studies of trial records show that Witch trials were extremely rare in the Middle Ages. They started to increase in the 14th century, when the Inquisition defined Witchcraft as a heresy. However the increase was very gradual for the first two centuries.

Even the advent of the printing press and the publication of the first Witch-hunting manuals (in the 15th century) only had a minor impact on the rate of persecution. Then, in the 16th century, everything

changed.irate Christians broke from the Catholic Church and formed their own protesting (“Protestant”) churches. During the Reformation, the century of religious warfare that this change provoked, the rate of Witch-hunting skyrocketed. What we think of as “the Burning Times” — the crazes, panics, and mass trials — mainly occurred in one century, from 1550-1650. The Burning Times were the child of the Reformation, not the Middle Ages. When the turmoil of the Reformation died down, so did Witch-hunting. Trials

IF WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT HAPPENED THE FIRST TIME,
WE HAVE NO CHANCE OF PREVENTING ITS RETURN.

dropped sharply as the 17th century ended, and they vanished completely in the 18th.

The Reformation also relates to the geography of the trials. Approximately one half of all the Witches who died in the Burning Times were killed in Germany, the heartland of the Reformation. Countries divided by the Reformation, like Switzerland, persecuted Witches fiercely, as did countries like France that had large religious minorities. Generally speaking, nations that kept one, unified, strong church had little Witch-hunting. It didn't matter if this church was Protestant or Catholic. Catholic Spain, Italy, Portugal and Ireland killed few Witches. The same holds true for Protestant England and Orthodox Russia. Scotland is the main exception to this rule; there a fanatic, King James, managed to stir up one of the worst persecutions of the Burning Times.

THEM AND US

Traditionally, we have blamed the Others for the Burning Times. Since the Great Hunt itself, authors laid the horrors at the feet of people they didn't like. Protestants blamed Catholics. Rationalists blamed the Church. Pagans blamed Christians. Feminists blamed male elites. No one took responsibility for the atrocities — they simply looked for scapegoats to accuse. Popular histories often portray the Burning Times as a rash of pogroms, like the Holocaust. An attack launched by the evil Them (men, Witch-hunters, Christians) against the good Us (women, Witches, Pagans).

Trial data dissolves these comforting stereotypes. All segments of European society bore some of the blame for the trials. The Church laid the intellectual foundations of the hunt by declaring Witchcraft a Satanic heresy, and its preaching drove the fears to a fever pitch. Secular powers did most of the killing. But the common people embraced the trials too. Most Witches were accused by their neighbors, not by a Witch-hunter, and in most areas half

or more of the trial evidence comes from women. Shocking as it sounds, even Witches supported the Burning Times. Wise-women, cunning men, and traditional magick-users routinely blamed illnesses on "black" magick. Robin Briggs ("Witches and Neighbors") found that in France cunning folk accused five times as many Witches as doctors did.

Yet none of these groups can take sole responsibility for the horrors — not even the Church or State. In fact, strong central authorities tended to minimize Witch-hunting (Scotland, again, is the chief exception to this). The persecution was worst where civil and religious authority was weakest: along borders, during civil and religious wars, in countries with weak central governments, and in religiously divided communities. In other words, the persecution was worst where the "common folk" were free to do as they wished. Yet it would be unfair to blame the Burning Times on average people, or women, or traditional Witches. Since time immemorial, people have feared baneful magick. These fears did not spawn Witch-crazes until the Church turned Witches into Satanic conspirators and the State agreed to prosecute these "heretics." It was this synergy, the cooperation of all parts of society, which made the Burning Times possible.

WHO WERE THE WITCHES?

And if there was no "Them" who caused the Burning Times, there was also no "Us" who were their target. Witches had nothing in common with each other. Trial records show that there is no generalization we can make about

Witches that holds true in all times and places. Not even gender, for while 75%-80% of Witches were women there were also areas like Iceland where up to 95% were men. The "average" Witch was a woman, and elderly, and poor. Yet there is no evidence that one particular group was singled out for persecution. The

only feature all

Witches shared is that they were accused of Witchcraft.

Before we knew what the average trial looked like, there were two main theories on who the Witches were.

Margaret Murray ("The Witch-Cult in

Western Europe") suggested that Witches were Pagans. Unfortunately Murray's research was abysmal, and further research has completely discredited her theory. Modern scholars, like Carlo Ginzburg and Gustav Henningsen, have found Witches who preserved Pagan rituals and beliefs. But Witches like this only make up a tiny fraction of the victims of the Burning Times. There's no evidence that most Witches were Pagan. The Church, in fact, explicitly said they weren't. The Inquisition was originally forbidden from investigating Witchcraft charges because, as Pope Alexander IV said in 1258, there was no evidence that they were heretics or that they "worshipped at the altars of idols." The Inquisition managed to convince a later pope that Witches were Satanists, but the Church — like modern historians — never found more than a handful of "Pagan" and Christo-Pagan Witches.

Another theory that you'll frequently hear is that Witches were healers and midwives. The Burning Times, so they say, were an attempt to break the power of these knowledgeable

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Witch," in the Journal of the Social History of Medicine 3 (1990), pp. 1-26) found that being a midwife actually reduced a woman's odds of being accused of Witchcraft.

NUMBERING THE DEAD

Perhaps the most dramatic change centers on the question of how many Witches died in the Burning Times. Before the late 1980s, this was a terribly controversial issue. And for a very good reason: we didn't have any solid evidence to go on. No one had counted how many trials existed. We didn't know how large the average trial was, how often they occurred, or how lethal they tended to be. Historians simply read Witch-hunting propaganda and tried to guess what sort of a death toll it implied. No surprise, then, that estimates varied wildly, from a low of ten thousand to a high of nine million. When we examined court records, we found that trials were actually far rarer than we expected. Most countries only had one or two crazes, not dozens as literature suggested. To date, less than 15,000 definite executions have been found!

It wasn't until the late 1980s that we had enough trial data to start basing our estimates on facts, rather than hunches. And when we did, estimates plummeted from millions or hundreds of thousands, down to 40,000 to 60,000.

There have been three main attempts to estimate the death toll of the Burning Times, using three slightly different methodologies.

Brian Levack ("The Witch Hunt in Early Modern Europe") found that there were approximately 110,000 Witch trials in the various regional studies. Approximately 48% of all accused Witches were executed, so he estimated that 60,000 people lost their lives in the Great Hunt. Ronald Hutton ("Counting the Witch Hunt", an unpublished article) began by totaling the regional studies. When he found an area that had not been studied, he looked for another that matched it as closely as possible and assumed that the uncounted area would kill about as many Witches as the counted area. Using this technique, Hutton arrived at a total of 40,000 deaths.

Anne Llewellyn Barstow ("Witchcraze") started with Levack's estimate of 60,000 deaths. Then she increased it to 100,000 to compensate for lost data and the new trials that are constantly being found. Although this sounds reasonable, it's not. Levack's 60,000 figure already contained a generous allowance for lost records (more than Barstow added, as a matter of fact). And the more trials we find, the lower the death toll goes. "New" trials don't appear out of nowhere — we "find" them when we first study a country's trial records. Historians never ignored uncounted areas, they simply guessed how many deaths occurred in them. Therefore when you add "new" trials, you also have to subtract the old estimate they're replacing. And since old estimates tend to be sky-high, finding "new" trials tends to decrease the death toll, not increase it. That's why the death toll figures are now so low, despite

the fact that we now know of 20 to 30 times as many cases

as we did before.


THE CHALLENGE

Today we Pagans and Witches face a challenge. Historians have modified their theories as new information became available. We have not. We continue to cite outdated and erroneous writers, like Margaret Murray, Jules Michelet, and Rossell Hope Robbins. We ignore the more dry, dull academic texts that contain solid research, preferring sensational texts that play to our emotions. For example, I have never seen a copy of Brian Levack's "The Witch Hunt in Early Modern Europe" in an occult bookstore. Yet many carry Anne Llewellyn Barstow's "Witchcraze," a deeply flawed book that has been ignored or reviled by the historical community.

And the quality of our research is critically important. In the 1980s, America went through a dress rehearsal for the Burning Times: the panics over satanic ritual abuse. Sociologists and anthropologists noted the stunning correlation between the two bouts of Witch-hunting. For the most part we didn't — because our history blinded us. Our history told us that the Burning Times were a series of pogroms launched against us. So when we heard tales of devil-worshipping Witches, we simply said, "That's got nothing to do with us. Those tales are about Satanists."

We owe it to ourselves and our ancestors to remedy this situation — to study the Burning Times as honestly as possible, using all of the new information at our disposal. For while we say, "Never Again the Burning," we cannot

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stop what we cannot see. If we do not know what happened the first time, we have no chance of preventing its return.

NOTES

¹ If you'd like a list of this data and sources for these numbers, drop me a note at jennyg@compuserve.com

FURTHER READING

Brian Levack's "The Witch Hunt in Early Modern Europe" is the best summary of this new data, though Robin Briggs' "Witches and Neighbors" is also good. Jeffrey Burton Russell's "Witchcraft in the Middle Ages" discusses the medieval cases, and Witchcraft's ties to heresy. Richard Kieckhefer's "European Witch Trials" is an unequalled guide to the trials from 1300-1500. "Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbat," by Carlo Ginzburg, highlights some of the other rumor panics of the 14th century, while R. Po-chia Hsia's "The Myth of Ritual Murder: Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany" examines the other Burning Times — the pogroms launched against the Jews. The modern parallels to the Burning Times, the satanic ritual abuse scares of the 1980s, are the subject of Jeffrey Victor's "Satanic Panic: The Creation of a Contemporary Legend."

Nevada Test Site

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time since 1947 that the Shoshone were able to have morning prayer on this portion of the 1250 square mile site. Another teepee was set up over five miles inside the Test Site perimeter, high on a ridgetop overlooking Mercury, Nevada, where the Sunrise Ceremony was also celebrated by tired but inspired activists. A third teepee was erected well inside the front entrance, visible to the thousands of workers arriving at dawn. Around one hundred people were at the front gate greeting workers and entertaining the Test Site guards.

Healing Global Wounds is a multi-cultural alliance of organizations and individuals seeking restoration of respectful sustainable living with the Earth. We coordinate a Spring and Fall Gathering at the Nevada Nuclear Test Site. Events combine education on issues, community and skills building, daily spiritual ceremony and taking personal nonviolent action to break every link in the nuclear chain. HGW is a member of the Abolition 2000 Global Network.

Contact Healing Global Wounds, PO Box 420, Tecopa CA 92389-0420, (760) 852-4175, fax (760) 852-4151, hgw@scruznet.com

Thanks to HGW's Coordinator, Jennifer Olaranna Viereck,

Toxic Ideologies

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Germany and those of our time.

They trace these affinities to an ecological sensibility that is spiritually rather than scientifically and politically based. They take particular alarm at reverence for nature rooted in Paganism and the occult rather than in a social critique, one that understands that environmental depredations are a consequence fundamentally of hierarchy and power differentials.

To Social Ecology the matter is simple. One either has a social critique of ecological issues or a spiritual one. A social critique that incorporates the spiritual dimensions of ecological crisis seems unfathomable, let alone a spiritual critique that sees its relation to social issues.

IT AIN'T NECESSARILY SO

That the German Nazi movement had undeniable roots in German Pagan revolt against the woes of urbanization and industrialization should not, however, mean that a similar revolt, in other times and under other social conditions, must also bear fascist fruit.

In fact, a direct parallel exists. A century and a half ago, at a time when the young Karl Marx was a doctoral student at the University of Jena, a movement against the early stages of urban and industrial development swept across parts of Europe. It opposed both industrialization and Newtonian-based rationality. It took particular hold in England among Romantic poets like Blake, Coleridge and Wordsworth, and in Germany among poets and philoso-

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