

Why Are Witches Called Witches?

by Johanna-Hypatia Cybeleia

Why do we call Witches Witches? What else could they be called? What did the word *witch* mean originally?

Debate continues to surge over the question of what a Witch *is*. Leaving aside that identity issue as too large to be contained in an article of this length, I took an interest in a side issue kicked up in the course of this debate: how the word *witch* got into our vocabulary in the first place, and what does it say that equivalent words don't say.

The etymology of *witch* has never been settled to everyone's satisfaction, although I favor one theory, discussed below, as most likely to be the real one.

Different etymologists have promoted several different theories and it does not look like they will reach consensus any time soon.

First, one of the most popular theories circulating in the Witch community is that the word comes from an Old English

root meaning "to bend." In this light, a Witch is an adept at bending forces to her will, at bending the course of reality which she shapes by her mastery. It's easy to see why this explanation is widely accepted. It confirms our preference for how we wish to see ourselves. There is in fact a Proto-Indo-European root **weig-* or **weik-* which combines related meanings including "to change," "to turn," "to bend," and "to weaken." Both forms probably came from a more basic form **wei-* "to twist, weave, braid." Latin *vicis* "turn, change" and German *Wechsel* "change" show the first sense. The two senses of bending and weakness are found in, for example, willow osiers and withy weirs made of thin, pliable tree branches. From this

concept is derived the word *wicker*, something made of osiers; and *weak*, originally something that could be bent easily, like a willow branch.

Another sister word branched from this same root is the *witch* in witch hazel. In an article about the *witch*-word, witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*) deserves a passing mention to clarify its origin in relation to the "magick woman" meaning of *witch*. Was it named "witch hazel" because of wise women's use of such healing herbs? Sorry, romantic as that sounds—no.

Witch hazel is called that because of its pliant branches, from Old English *wice*. Still, given that Hazel is also a girlname, the temptation to name comical cartoon

feel, a stronger case to be made for another etymology.

Eric Partridge, in *Origins*, connects *witch* with the Latin word *victima*, referring to ritual sacrifice, and he says these both derive from Proto-Indo-European (PIE) **weig-* "to sacrifice." The Germanic origin of *witch* refers to the concept of sacredness connected with the ancient religious use of sacrifice. Partridge connects it with Old High German *wihen*, German *weihen* "to consecrate," and OHG *wih*, Middle High German *wich*, "holy."

John Ayto's *Dictionary of Word Origins* and Joseph T. Shipley's *Dictionary of Word Origins* both echo Partridge in connecting *witch* with *victima*

"sacrificial offering" and *weihen* "consecrate." What this suggests to me is that the name of Wicca comes from the very concept of religion itself. Shipley also relates the idea of victim to the root of victory.

The etymology in the *American Heritage*

Dictionary, 4th ed., cites "Old English *wicce*, *witch* and *wicca*, wizard, sorcerer." These are derived from Proto-Indo-European **weg-* "to be strong, be lively." Derivatives include *wake*, *watch*, *wait*, *vigilante*, *veillee*, *vegetable*, and *velocity*.

Specifically, the *AHD* connects *wicca* with the concept of being awake, and traces it back to the suffixed form **weg-yo-* (the Germanic **wikkjaz* necromancer, "one who wakes the dead").

The *AHD* does not corroborate Partridge's etymology connecting *wicca* with *victim*; it does not even trace a PIE root for *victima*, but stops at Latin without going any further back.

But note that the fourth edition of the *AHD*, published in 2000, disagrees with its *witch*-etymology from its first



Witches "Hazel" must be irresistible. Other plant names that come from this same Indo-European (IE) root are *wych elm* (from the same Old English word *wice*) and *vetch* (from Latin *vicia*—because of its twisty tendrils).

From the concept of turning, in the root **weig-/weik-*, we get the words *week* and *wicket* (originally "door that turns"). In addition, *vicar* and *vice-* in compounds like vice-president (changing roles), and *vicissitude*, all from the above mentioned Latin *vicis*. All in all, I find the constellation of meanings around this root quite fascinating and thought provoking, and it would be nice to derive the word *witch* from it. After all, many of us Witches like to sing, "She changes everything She touches," to express our sense of the Goddess at work in our Witchcraft. But there is, I

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edition of 1969. The first edition derives *witch* from the PIE root **weik-2* and says: “In words connected with magic and religious notions (in Germanic and Latin).” The first edition derives both *witch* and *victim* from this root, but says **weik-5* “to conquer” is a different root. There are so many differences between the etymologies in the fourth and first editions of this dictionary, it looks as though the etymology department had been overthrown in a coup d’état and replaced by a radically different faction.

Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology says:

Witch. n. About 1250 *wiche*, in Genesis and Exodus; sorceress (about 1000), feminine of *wicca* sorcerer, wizard (about 890). These words are related to, and probably derivatives of Old English *wiccian* to practice Witchcraft, itself related to Old English *wigle* divination, *wiglian*, to divine, and *wig* idol — all cognate with Old Frisian *wigila* sorcery, Witchcraft, and probably *wicken*, *wikken* to bewitch, divine, Old High German *wih*, *wihi* holy, Old Icelandic *ve* temple, and Gothic *weihs* holy.

So Barnhart agrees with Partridge about connecting it with Germanic religious words meaning “holy, sacred,” but doesn’t trace it back to Proto-Indo-European.

The etymology in *Webster’s New World Dictionary* has a different explanation for the source of the witch-concept: “IE base **weik-* to separate (hence set

aside for religious worship), whence Gothic *weihs*, holy, OE *wig*, idol.” This dictionary’s etymology for *victim* derives it from the same root and cross-references it to *witch*. However, I have not found any other source that has **weik-* as an IE root meaning “to separate.”

An Indo-European Comparative Dictionary by Stuart E. Mann does not show *witch* or *wicca* among its daughter language derivatives. But it does derive the Old English word for “idol” from a different root: from **ueik-* “like; likeness,” the source of the Greek word *oikos*, icon. Mann derives the Germanic root for “sacred” this way: from **ueik-* “settlement, dwelling” (the source of Greek *eikona*, “house, home,” from whence we get ecology, and Norse *vik* “village”). According to Mann, the Germanic forms of this root produced Gothic *weihs*, “village,” Old High German and Old Saxon *wih*, “temple,” Middle High German *wich* “dwelling, town; (adj.) holy,” cf. also *wihe*, *wiwe* “dedication.”

It seems etymologists cannot quite agree on the ultimate source of *witch*, but I would say the connection of *wicca* with other ancient Germanic religious words meaning “sacred” and “holy” is the strongest. This corroborates the Wiccan claim that they are reviving (or rather reconstructing) the Old Religion.

A large part of the fascination that this specific English word *witch* holds for me is the sense of its unique aptness for

the subject. Perhaps modern English-speaking Witches benefit from having a special readymade name for people in magical Earth-based religion, a name that already has a strong, deep resonance behind it. Words for Witches in other languages often simply amount to the grammatically feminine version of “magician.” For example, Arabic *sahirah*, French *sorcière*, Greek *magissa*, Hebrew *mekhashefah*, Lithuanian *burtininke* all mean “female magician, sorceress.” In Persian, a completely genderless language, the unisex word *jadugar* has to serve indiscriminately for magicians, sorcerers, Witches, warlocks, and all other such occult practitioners, male and female alike.

While I think I like the English word *witch* best of all for its uniqueness and its many levels of suggestibility, some other languages as well have interesting witchwords.

Italian *strega*, like *witch* in English, has this unique sense of “woman who works with magick in an Earth-based religion.” It comes from Latin *strix* meaning “screech owl.” The screech owl being a symbol of Hecate, the Goddess of ancient Witches, its name has been transferred to the Witches themselves. Going further back in mythology, the screech owl was also a symbol of the Mesopotamian Lilith. The continuing presence of this symbol, this creature of the night, associated with the Dark Feminine, takes us back through the hidden story of women throughout

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the ages, across the shadows of time.

In Italian, the female meaning of *strega* is primary, the reverse of usual gendered patterns in languages where the word for the male magician takes the unmarked, hence more important, form. Here the feminine form is unmarked, while the word for warlock, *stregone*, is derived by adding a masculine ending. In this sense, *strega* is a close match with English *witch*, derived from the Old English feminine form *wicce*.

That the feminine definition of *witch* is primary is shown by the definition of *warlock* as “a male Witch,” not the other way around. This focus on the feminine is two-edged: Witchcraft or *stregheria* got a special name to mark it as a specifically feminine type of magick. This may have been because male domination set it apart to denigrate it as inferior to male-controlled magick. But that in turn, taking it further back, attests to women’s original mastery of the Craft, their independent female power which had to be suppressed.

Both genders of Spanish *bruja* and *brujo* are apparently equal, with precedence given to neither, as a simple vowel switch at the end is enough to change gender. *Bruja* comes from a similar semantic origin as the English words *heathen* and *pagan*. The source of *bruja* is Latin *brucus* “heather.” The English word *briar*, from French *bruyère* “heath,” also originates in this Latin

word. The implication is that *brujas* were pagans of the rural areas where heath and heather grow.

But the Latin word itself was borrowed from an ancient Celtic word, **bruko* in Proto-Celtic. This is, for example, the source of Irish *fraoch* “heather.” The Celtic word derives from—and this is where it gets interesting—the Proto-Indo-European root **werk-* “turn, twist, bend.” This is an extension of the more basic root **wer-* “to turn, bend,” which has produced many daughter words including *worth*, *weird*, *verse*, *vertex*, *wreath*, *wring*, *wrench*, *verge*, *wrist*, *wrestle*, *ribald*, *warp*, to name a few. Somehow these two Proto-Indo-European roots **wei-* and **wer-*, with the suffixed *-k* making them **weik-* and **werk-*, both produced words for Witch in English and Spanish. It’s downright uncanny. We even find an etymological connection to the Weird Sisters!

German *Hexe* is another woman-specific Witchword, and goes back to the same Germanic root that apparently produced English *hag*. Old High German *hagzisse* and Old English *hægtesse* are clearly both from the same Common Germanic origin, said to have referred to a terrifying female spirit, perhaps along the lines of Lilith. It literally means “hedge rider” or “hedge straddler,” i.e. one with a foot in both worlds, between the worlds as a Witch. The later development of English *hag* into a pejorative synonym for *crone* is part of a well-known syndrome associating wise women with cronehood. For a further

discussion on the history of the word *hag*, see the entry in *Womanwords: A Dictionary of Words About Women* by Jane Mills.

BENDING AND SHAPING ENERGY

To sum up my feelings on the question of where the English word *witch* came from: while my research has inclined me to think that *witch* can be traced back to the root **weig-* referring to the sacred, I also feel attracted by the derivation from **weig-* or **weik-* meaning “bend.”

I feel like speculating on an even deeper connection linking these two concepts, one rooted in women’s early shamanism, perhaps inspired by some entheogenic mushroom. The shamanic realm of the sacred is where energies flow, swirl, bend, twist, and writhe like the totemic serpents of wisdom.

The adept who can bend and shape these swirling energies is the original magician, the original Witch, pioneer of the sacred.

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For a fascinating look at the history and semantics of words used for Witches in various languages, especially Hebrew, see Alexei Kondratiev, “Thou Shalt Not Suffer a Witch to Live: an Enquiry into Biblical Mistranslation.” Enchanté #18 (1994) pp. 11-15. Online at <http://www.draknet.com/proteus/Suffer.htm>

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