

THE GREAT WITCH CRAZE

The common misconception about witch hunts is that they were mass executions that occurred in the Middle Ages spurred on by the Medieval Catholic church. The truth is: During the Middle Ages charges of witchcraft *were* brought against individuals, but less than half of them ended in any punishment for the accused. Those convicted of witchcraft typically suffered penalties no harsher than public penances such as a day in the stocks.



Magic, sorcery, and witchcraft had long been condemned by the Church, whose attitude towards witchcraft was explained in the *Canon Episcopi* written in about 900 AD. It stated that witchcraft and magic did not really exist, and that those who believed in such things "had been seduced by the Devil in dreams and visions into old pagan errors".

It was not until 1400's, after the end of the Middle Ages, that witch hunt hysteria began. The persecution of witches became more brutal following the publication of a book called *The Malleus Maleficarum*, which was a direct reason for witchcraft to become increasingly accepted as a real and dangerous phenomenon.

The *Malleus Maleficarum* (Latin for "The Hammer of Witches" or *Der Hexenhammer* in German) is a famous treatise on witches, written in 1486 by Heinrich Kramer, an Inquisitor of the Catholic Church, and was first published in Germany in 1487. As mentioned before, prior to the publication of this book, witchcraft was considered largely imaginary. Kramer wrote the *Malleus* shortly after being expelled from Innsbruck by the local bishop after a failed attempt to conduct his own witchcraft prosecution. Kramer's purpose in writing the book was to explain his own views on witchcraft, systematically refute arguments claiming that witchcraft does not exist, discredit those who expressed skepticism about its reality, claim that those who practiced witchcraft were more often women than men, and to convince magistrates to use Kramer's recommended procedures for finding and convicting witches. In 1490, three years after its publication, the Catholic Church condemned the *Malleus Maleficarum*, although it was later used by royal courts during the Renaissance, and contributed to the increasingly brutal prosecution of witchcraft during the 16th and 17th centuries. It did much to spur on and sustain some two centuries of witch-hunting hysteria in Europe.

The *Malleus* codified the folklore and beliefs of the Alpine peasants and was dedicated to the implementation of Exodus 22:18: "You shall not permit a sorceress to live." The work is divided into three parts. In Part I the reality and the depravity of witches is emphasized, and any disbelief in witchcraft is condemned as heresy. Because of the nature of the enemy, any witness, no matter what his credentials, may testify against an accused. Part II is a compendium of fabulous stories about the activities of witches—e.g., diabolic compacts, sexual relations with devils (incubi and succubi), transvection (night riding), and metamorphosis. Part III is a

discussion of the legal procedures to be followed in witch trials. Torture is sanctioned as a means of securing confessions.

The treatise describes how women and men become inclined to practice witchcraft. The text argues that women are more susceptible to demonic temptations through the manifold weaknesses of their gender. It was believed that they were weaker in faith and more carnal than men. It was during this time that the more typical conception of a witch formed—a man or woman who has sold his or her soul to the devil and receives magical powers in return.

After the publication of the *Malleus*, it seems as though about three quarters of those individuals prosecuted as witches were women. (Though in some countries, including Iceland, the majority were men.) The *Malleus Maleficarum* accuses male and female witches of infanticide, cannibalism and casting evil spells to harm their enemies as well as having the power to steal a man's private parts. It goes on to give accounts of witches committing these crimes. The *Malleus Maleficarum* was able to spread throughout Europe rapidly in the late 15th and the beginning of the 16th century due to the innovation of the printing press in the middle of the 15th century by Johannes Gutenberg. The invention of printing some thirty years before the first publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum* instigated the fervor of witch hunting, and, in the words of Russell, "the swift propagation of the witch hysteria by the press was the first evidence that Gutenberg had not liberated man from original sin."

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT WITCHCRAFT?

Although witches, witchcraft, and sorcerers are mentioned in the Bible, references to them are few and far between. In the Old Testament (the Jewish Torah) in the codes of conduct attributed to Moses, witchcraft is mentioned as punishable by death (along with many other sins including mating with an animal). Deuteronomy 18:9-12 says, "When thou art come into the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not learn to do after the abominations of those nations. There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire [child sacrifice], or that useth divination [fortune-telling], or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the LORD: and because of these abominations the LORD thy God doth drive them out from before thee." Leviticus 20:27 says, "A man also or woman that hath a familiar spirit, or that is a wizard, shall surely be put to death: they shall stone them with stones: their blood shall be upon them." Exodus 22:18 puts it simply, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." The New Testament mentions witchcraft among a list of sins (Galatians 5:20) but does not prescribe a harsh punishment for such sins as the Old Testament does.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did the paranoia concerning witches develop?
2. What are some misconceptions about witch trials that this article helps clear up?
3. What makes the idea of witches (as presented in the *Malleus Maleficarum*) frightening or disturbing?