

**Pagan Ritual, Witchcraft, and Heresy:
Transformation from the Early to High Middle Ages: ca. 500-ca. 1300 A.D.**

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Witchcraft or such accusations are often associated with Christianity, bringing forth images of the Salem Witch Trials, innocent women being burned at the stake, cauldrons of potions, and naked dances under a full moon. Based on contemporary culture's images of witchcraft, it would be easy to assume that magic was deeply ingrained in Christianity, especially its original form, Roman Catholicism. However, magic and sorcery existed well before Christ throughout all of human civilization, including Classical Greece and Rome.¹ After Christianity's legalization, the religion spread throughout Europe and was established as the dominant belief of the continent. Christianity taught its opinions on witchcraft to its converted peoples. Thus the spread of Christianity led to a denunciation of magic and pagan ritual present in the preexisting cultures of its new converts. Despite the adamance of the Church, pagan practices involving magic and sorcery died away slowly, even though Church theologians continued to condemn them for centuries. However, as much as Christians argued against pagan practices, they seem not to have been as concerned with witchcraft during the Early Middle Ages (ca. 476-1000 A.D.).² With the rebirth of Europe in the High Middle Ages (ca. 1000-1300 A.D.), however, reportings of sorcery became more common, arguably due to an increase in learning and higher interest in recording and commenting on these occurrences. As a result, more texts were written by the Roman Catholic Church's theologians condemning these people and their practices. Nevertheless, these occurrences were still regarded by contemporaries as rare and generally unsuccessful. While medieval Europe was becoming more concerned with witchcraft and sorcery, it was not yet creating the widespread fear that would be seen in the Later Middle Ages, ca. 1300-1500 A.D., and Early Modern Period, ca. 1500-1800 A.D.³ Throughout the Early and High Middle Ages, thought on witchcraft slowly transformed from a deep concern over pagan magical rituals to fears of diabolical witchcraft, which became widely regarded as heretical.

Witchcraft in the periods of the Early and High Middle Ages has been widely ignored by historians who have instead favored the more popular Later Middle Ages or Early Modern period. Therefore, in this study, these two earlier time periods will be exclusively explored. Secondary sources on Early and High Middle Ages magic and witchcraft are lacking; although this scholarship exists, it should be greatly expanded because these time periods provide independent richness as well as origins for the beliefs of the following time periods.

¹ Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 41.

² Kors and Peters, *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700*, 4.

³ Kors and Peters, *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700*, 4.

Christians throughout the Middle Ages condemned witchcraft, but during the late Roman Empire, Christians themselves were accused of the same actions they themselves later associated with witches. Even Jesus was accused of being a sorcerer by the Greek philosopher Celsus, a fierce opponent of Christianity.⁴ In 197 A.D., the Christian Minucius Felix recorded in his *Octavius* allegations by pagans against the Christians: “I hear that they adore the head of an ass, that basest of creatures . . . some say that they worship the genitals of their pontiff and priest . . . An infant covered over with meal . . . this infant is slain . . . they lick up its blood; eagerly they divide its limbs.”⁵ The comments on cannibalism likely stem from pagan misunderstanding or fear surrounding the early Christian sacrament of the Eucharist, in which bread was believed to be changed through God’s power into the literal body of Christ, which the Christians then consumed. These accusations nevertheless provide valuable insight into late Roman minds since they behaved in a very similar way to future Christians when they denounced witchcraft.

Once Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire under Emperor Theodosius in the late fourth century,⁶ Church officials presented laws condemning magic. No longer would Christianity tolerate accusations of animal and genital worship or of venerating anything but God. Instead, staunch laws were passed under the Theodosian Code, which was heavily influenced by Christianity,⁷ laws that severely punished any worshiping of idols. Justinian’s *Code* states the adoration or summoning of demons is a capital offence.⁸ Christianity was starting strong in its fight against magic and demon worship.

Between the fifth and the seventh centuries, as Europe transformed from an empire centered in Rome to a series of Germanic kingdoms, Christianity became the dominant religion on the continent. In the Early Middle Ages, both Arian Christians and Roman Catholic Christians began to travel as missionaries to convert the people of other regions and cultures to Christianity; these missionaries were especially successful with the Germanic tribes.⁹ However, even when these clans became faithful Christians, they still held onto aspects of their pagan, magic rituals such as the use of amulets to prevent disease. An anonymous source from a Germanic tribe, who personally practiced ritual healing stated, “Procure a little bit of the dung of a wolf, preferably

⁴ Jeffrey Burton Russel, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1972), 45.

⁵ Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, *Internet Ancient History Sourcebook*, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/christian-cannibals.asp> (accessed November 25, 2019).

⁶ Jackson J. Spielvogel, *Western Civilization*, vol. A: *To 1500*, 8th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2012), 182.

⁷ Julio Caro Baroja, *The World of Witches*, trans. O.N.V Glendinning (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), 43.

⁸ Baroja, *The World of Witches*, 43.

⁹ Spielvogel, *Western Civilization*, 198.

some which contains small bits of bone, and pack it in a tube which the patient may easily wear as an amulet.”¹⁰ Aspects of the natural world, such as wolf’s dung are not enough to create healing; they must be joined with an amulet to create the magical healing properties. Catholic prelates and clergy did not approve of these magical rituals leftover from their converts’ previous spiritual beliefs. Theologians such as Church Father St. Augustine quickly condemned these customs as well as all magic in general. Augustine’s work, *On Christian Teaching* (completed 426 A.D.) stated, “to this category belong all the amulets and remedies which the medical profession also condemns, whether these consist of incantations, or certain marks which their exponents call ‘characters,’ or the business of hanging certain things up.”¹¹ Amulets of various kinds were a deep concern for Church leaders; Augustine does not simply denounce one kind of charm, such as the healing one with wolf dung, but all that exist in pagan ritual. Because he was one of the most influential of all the Church Fathers, one to whom medieval authors of works on witchcraft and magic looked for guidance, Augustine’s disapproval of pagan practices resulted in their condemnation throughout the entirety of the Middle Ages.

Although the Roman Catholic Church condemned pagan ritual, Norwegian University of Science and Technology theology professor Nils Hallvard Korsvoll suggests many aspects of pagan ritual were incorporated into Christianity,

. . . archaeological evidence shows that the use of amulets and magical manuals continued within the dominion of the new Church and Christian state. Moreover, these magical practices did not only continue as some sort of pagan remnant, many amulets and magical manuals show that they actively engaged with and took up Christian themes and ritual elements together with the older, traditional ritual elements. Popular Christian elements in these amulets are invocations of Christ and the Virgin, drawings of crosses.¹²

Objects such as the personal crucifix and saint’s medallion are therefore Christianized versions of amulets. Ironically, approved Catholic objects such as the medal and cross have origins in pagan magic and sorcery, which creates questions as to how many Christian practices and objects emerged from these origins even though the source of power of these objects was believed to originate from God and his saints rather than from nature or pagan gods.¹³ Korsvoll

¹⁰ Anonymous, in *Western Civilization*, ed. Spielvogel, 224.

¹¹ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, in *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700*, ed. Kors and Peters, 43-47 at 45.

¹² Nils Hallvard Korsvoll, “Official Teaching and Popular Practice: Are Church Opinions on Magic Reflected in the Surviving Amulets from the Early Middle Ages?” in *Bild und Schriftauf ‘magischen’ Artefakten*, ed. Sarah Kiyannrad, Christoffer Theis, and Laura Willer (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), 149-164 at 149-150.

¹³ Spielvogel, *Western Civilization*, 224.

explains that for Christians this difference was vital in separating good Christian practices from evil magic,

After all, Christ and his disciples performed miracles and wonders, and this will not have lessened the belief in supernatural assistance. Other scholars further argue that the miracles in the Gospels differ from other contemporary magical practices only in that they originate from the Christian God. But, of course, this distinction of origin was for Christian theology the very key of the matter. And, with the biblical stories of Simon Magus and the Witch of Endor as infamous examples of the evil of magic, official Christianity remained strictly opposed to magic.¹⁴

While differences between pagan and Christian ritual may seem slight to modern observers, to medieval people, the power of God was the defining factor in their practices, which made Christian elements moral and pagan ones diabolical.

In ca. 530 A.D., the Christian monk Caesarius of Arles's Sermon 54 proclaimed, "No one should summon charmers, for if a man does this evil, he immediately loses the sacrament of baptism, becoming at once impious and pagan. Unless generous almsgiving together with hard, prolonged penance saves him, such a man will perish forever."¹⁵ Caesarius of Arles makes quite a bold statement here as he asserts interactions with sorcery and magic can immediately destroy one's Christianity. Although Caesarius despises pagan ceremonies, he does not deny many of them are effective. He explains, "God permits this to the Devil . . . to try the Christian people. Thus, when they sometimes are able to recover from sickness by these impious remedies, men see some truth in them and afterwards more readily believe in the Devil."¹⁶ Burchard of Worms in the *Corrector* (1008-1012 A.D.) inquired, "Have you sung diabolical songs there and performed dances which the pagans have invented by the teaching of the Devil?"¹⁷ The Devil was associated with teaching pagans diabolical ritual rather than their gods. This statement also suggests that medieval Europeans feared that all was not Christian; even medieval therapies which appeared to be authentic could be tricks of the Devil as he attempted to gain souls for damnation. Isidore of Seville (560-636 A.D.) expanded the explanation of pagan ritual in his massive encyclopedic work, *Etymologies*, written in the early seventh century. Isidore's work was highly influential throughout the entirety of the Middle Ages; in fact, copies of his work

¹⁴ Korsvoll, *Bild und Schrift auf 'magischen' Artefakten*, 150.

¹⁵ Caesarius of Arles, *Sermon 54*, in *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700*, ed. Kors and Peters, 47-50 at 48.

¹⁶ Caesarius of Arles, *Sermon 54*, 49.

¹⁷ Burchard of Worms, *Corrector*, in *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700*, ed. Kors and Peters, 63-67 at 65.

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have even been found in Ireland.¹⁸ He listed the different kinds of sorcerers and their diabolical acts, all of which were condemned:

Horoscopers speculate on the hours of the nativity of men in terms of their different fates. *Salsitores* are so called because by observing parts of their members leaping they predict the meaning of future happiness or sadness . . . In all these the demonic art has arisen from a pestilential association of bad men and angels . . . Whence all must be avoided by Christians and rejected and condemned with thorough-going malediction.¹⁹

Any action seeking knowledge about oneself, the past, present, or future with means besides the power of God was rejected.

There were many different texts in medieval Europe about witchcraft, and not all of them had material approved by the Roman Catholic Church. Therefore, Bishop Halitgar of Cambrai was asked in 830 A.D. by Archbishop Ebbo of Rheims to create a text that would exclusively have Church-approved evidence.²⁰ A universal work on witchcraft would help prevent any potential heretical works by authors with opinions different from the Church because there would be a definition for the Church's beliefs. Halitgar of Cambrai's *The Roman Penitential* (830 A.D.), a compilation of official Roman Catholic texts on witchcraft, stated, "If anyone is a conjurer-up of storms he shall do penance for seven years, three years on bread."²¹ The repentance of seven years is especially long, reserved for other crimes like murder.²² Additionally, these were holy numbers: three was the number of the Holy Trinity, and seven was considered the most mysterious digit by the Fathers of the Church.²³ Weather-magic could easily destroy crop fields and animal herds, resulting in famine and widespread pain and death. People were especially afraid of witches who could control the elements and who could destroy their entire livelihood within minutes. With all these condemnations of each form of magic, pagan rituals began to die out and be replaced by "miracles" originating from the divine power of God and the saints.²⁴ However, this issue would not be entirely solved, as shown by theologians who enforced teachings against pagan ritual through the High and Later Middle Ages.

¹⁸ Caesarius of Arles, *Sermon 54*, 50

¹⁹ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, in *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700*, ed. Kors and Peters, 50-54 at 53-54.

²⁰ Halitgar of Cambrai, *The "Roman" Penitential*, in *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700*, ed. Kors and Peters, 54-57 at 55.

²¹ Halitgar of Cambrai, *The "Roman" Penitential*, 56.

²² Halitgar of Cambrai, *The "Roman" Penitential*, 56.

²³ Emile Mâle, *The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Dora Nussey, 3rd ed. (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1958).

²⁴ Spielvogel, *Western Civilization*, 224.

The High Middle Ages experienced an increase in texts describing witchcraft, which provide us with the opinions of theologians, the Church, and common people on this subject. Previously, in the Early Middle Ages, pagan rituals were the Church's primary concern. The thought was that, although sorcery occurred, it was an occasional event brought on by an individual act of the Devil and skepticism was wise in the face of tales of witchcraft. In the High Middle Ages incidents of witchcraft and black magic are believed to have increased, possibly as a result of the rise of learned magic in the eleventh through thirteenth centuries that resulted from the emergence of universities and urban schools outside of monasteries and cathedrals.²⁵ Additionally, learned magic may have increased due to frequent Christian interactions with Muslims who provided the Europeans with Arabic texts, many dealing with astrology and alchemy. Muslims and Jews received this knowledge from the Ancient Greeks.²⁶ The Church condemned this magic both morally and legally as heresy. Generally, temporal authorities would act against those accused of witchcraft on behalf of the Church.²⁷

During the High Middle Ages, recognizable aspects of witchcraft began to emerge as well as strict control over Christian actions and beliefs. An early form of the witches *sabbat*, a gathering of witches to perform rituals dedicated to the Devil, was mentioned in a text from a 10th-century penitential, entitled *Canon Episcopi*, recorded in Regino of Prüm's *Libri de synodalibus causis et disciplinis ecclesiasticis* (906 A.D.) and incorporated into Gratian's influential compilation of canon law, the *Decretum* (1140 A.D.):

. . . [S]ome wicked women, turned back after Satan, seduced by illusions and phantoms of demons, believe and affirm that: with Diana, a goddess of the pagans, and an unnumbered multitude of women, they ride on certain beasts and transverse many areas of the earth in the stillness of the quiet night, obey her commands as if she were their mistress and are called on special nights to her service.²⁸

The Roman goddess Diana is here presented as a servant of Satan, who has seduced and deceived these women into imagining that they were riding with the deity. Many in the Middle Ages believed that pagan gods – whether Egyptian, Greek, Persian, or Roman – were demons who served Lucifer and tricked ancient peoples into worshiping them as gods.²⁹ The *Canon Episcopi* commanded bishops and priests to drive out of their parishes and dioceses those who

²⁵ Michael David Bailey, *Magic and Superstition in Europe: A Concise History from Antiquity to the Present* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2007), 93.

²⁶ Bailey, *Magic and Superstition in Europe*, 93.

²⁷ Bailey, *Magic and Superstition in Europe*, 108.

²⁸ Regino of Prüm, *Canon Episcopi: Decretum, Book 2, Chapter 371*, in *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700 Documentary*, ed. Kors and Peters, 60-63 at 62.

²⁹ Kors and Peters, "Introduction," in *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700*, 4.

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practiced such arts as divination and magic. Christians were no longer tolerant of those who worshipped pagan gods.

Catholicism was incredibly rigid in its beliefs due to fear of witchcraft. Texts such as Burchard of Worms' *The Corrector* (1008-1012 A.D.) highlighted increased strictness of the Church: "Have you come to any place to pray other than a church or other religious place which thy bishop or your priest showed you . . . do penance for three years on the appointed feast days."³⁰ Worship was strictly controlled, praying in any unapproved place was deemed sinful as well as belief in certain superstitions. The Roman Catholic Church's restriction of the approved places of adoration allowed prelates and clergy to control the faithful laity more effectively. Any veneration outside an accepted place was cause for concern over witchcraft or heresy, which intimidated the faithful laity into obeying the Church. Burchard of Worms stated, "Have you believed what some are wont to believe? When they make any journey, if a crow croaks from their left side to their right, they hope on this account to have a prosperous journey . . . they trust more to this augury and omen than to God."³¹ Here he clearly warned against being deceived by those who believed in magic and superstition more than in Divine Providence.

Medieval Christians had many rules to follow to ensure they were indeed faithful to God and properly avoiding witchcraft to achieve eternal salvation. Among the clearest of these influences, especially on learned magic, was Hugh of St. Victor. A schoolmaster as well as a teacher of canon law at the prestigious Abbey of St. Victor outside Paris, the man was also author of *The Didascalicon* (ca. 1120 A.D.), which offers readers a clear and concise explanation of every different aspect of witchcraft. Hugh of St. Victor recorded the origins of sorcery: "[T]he first discoverer of magic is believed to have been Zoroaster, king of the Bactrians, who some say is none other than Cham the son of Noah with his name changed."³² Therefore, this claim that the first magician was the son of Noah brings sorcery full circle, as its origins are tied in the Old Testament. The *Didascalicon* continued, "as generally received it [magic] embraces five kinds of sorcery: *mantiké*-which means divination, vain mathematics, fortunetelling, enchantments, and illusions."³³ The text then went on to state that divination has five subcategories: necromancy, geomancy, hydromancy, aeromancy, pyromancy. These are all a form of divination, necromancy through the means of the dead and the others through means of one of the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. Vain/False mathematics has the sub-categories of soothsaying, augury, and horoscopy. Soothsaying is the prediction of time, augury is the practice of observing birds, and horoscopy is the practice of seeking answers about life from the stars. Hugh was strongly

³⁰ Burchard of Worms, *Corrector*, at 64.

³¹ Burchard of Worms, *Corrector*, 66.

³² Hugh of St. Victor, *Didascalicon*, in *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700*, ed. Kors and Peters, 67-70 at 68.

³³ Hugh of St. Victor, *Didascalicon*, 69.

opposed to all forms of magic and believed they all had the same diabolical origins whether they were pagan magic or learned magic.

As previously mentioned, Christians in late antiquity were accused of infanticide and cannibalism. In 1154, the Christian John of Salisbury accused witches of killing children for diabolical rituals in his text, *Policraticus*: “Moreover, infants are set out for *lamias* [witches] and appear to be cut up into pieces, eaten, and gluttonously stuffed into the witches’ stomachs. Then, through the mercy of the witch-ruler, they are returned [in one piece] to their cradles.”³⁴ Here Christians were seen associating witches with the terrible crimes Christians themselves were once accused of by members of the Late Roman Empire. Perhaps these associations of witchcraft with the deaths of infants were used as scapegoats to explain the high death rate of children from accidents and sickness during the Middle Ages.³⁵

Witchcraft was regarded as heresy because witches were believed to achieve their power through the completion of a contract with Satan, often sexual in nature.³⁶ Contracts with the Devil were often seen as inescapable even with repentance. In his *Chronicle of the Kings of England* (1140 A.D.), William of Malmesbury wrote about a witch who regrets her choices and says, “although you [clergymen] cannot revoke the sentence already passed upon my soul, yet you may, perhaps, rescue my body.”³⁷ The witch’s body is unable to be rescued, however, and she is carried away by a ferocious demon while screaming for mercy.³⁸ The story was meant to show that even true repentance and the aid of priests are not enough to save the soul of a witch or sorcerer; this tale intended to scare the devout into avoidance of any magic or debauchery, or else face the pains of Hell. The Dominican author of the *Summa theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas, was another forerunner, not just on magic and witchcraft, but on theology in general. In his thirteenth-century *Commentary on the Four Books of Sentences* (of Peter Abelard), Aquinas wrote, “Sorcery is therefore to be considered permanent because remedy may not be had for human agency, although God may impose a remedy either by forcing the Devil or even against the resistance of the Devil.”³⁹ Therefore, the power of God is confirmed to be stronger than that

³⁴ John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, in *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700*, ed. Kors and Peters, 77-78.

³⁵ Judith M. Bennett, *A Medieval Life: Cecilia Penifader of Brigstock*, c. 1295-1344 (Boston: McGraw-Hill College, 1999), 74-77.

³⁶ Henry Charles Lea, *Materials Toward A History of Witchcraft*, vol. 1, ed. Arthur C. Howland (New York and London: Thomas Yoseloff, Inc., 1957), 201.

³⁷ William of Malmesbury, *The Sorceress of Berkeley*, in *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700*, ed. Kors and Peters, 70-72 at 71.

³⁸ William of Malmesbury, *The Sorceress of Berkeley*, 72.

³⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Four Books of Sentences*, in *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700*, ed. Kors and Peters, 104-105 at 105.

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of the Devil; only God can rescue one from the grasps of Lucifer. Aquinas was not attempting to reassure witches that they will be saved, but rather, to ensure that the infinite power of God was known, so that stories of the Devil's power would not cause the masses to doubt God's strength.

Although all witchcraft was popularly believed to be heresy, papal sources did not always allow the two to be condemned together. Indeed, as shown by Pope Gregory IX's 1233 decretal letter, *Vox in Rama*, the Holy Father believed witchcraft had many heretical aspects:

The novice kisses him [a demon] and feels cold, like ice, after the kiss the memory of the catholic faith totally disappears from his heart . . . They even receive the body of our Lord every year at Easter from the hand of a priest, and carrying it in their mouths to their homes, they throw it into the latrine [toilet] in contempt of the savior . . . These wretches also believe in him [Lucifer] and affirm that he is the creator of heaven, and will return there in his glory when the Lord has fallen, through which with him and not before him they hope that they will have eternal happiness.⁴⁰

This shows that the many heretical aspects of sorcery, heresy, and witchcraft were treated as different issues by the pope. The investigation of sorcery and heresy were separated into two distinct jurisdictions. Inquisitors of heretical depravity appeared in the 1230s; their job was to find and eliminate heresy. They became increasingly concerned with witchcraft, however, likely due to a surge in cases, and asked Pope Alexander IV in the 1250s A.D. if it was appropriate for them to examine both. Due to sorcery's place in the jurisdiction of secular courts and with bishops, the pope wished to keep the two separate. In 1258 Pope Alexander IV issued a statement on sorcery and the role of Inquisition: "The inquisitors of pestilential heresy, commissioned by the apostolic see, ought not intervene in cases of divination or sorcery unless these clearly savor of manifest heresy."⁴¹ Despite the Roman Catholic Church's concern over witchcraft, it was also worried about the preservation of the medieval European political structure and was reluctant to sacrifice this for the hunting of witches and sorcerers as heretics. Additionally, the pope may have been concerned with inquisitors gaining too much power over the Church as his next text is on the subject of inquisitors examining usury.

In the Early Middle Ages, the concern was not witchcraft but rather pagan magical rituals, which threatened the authority and beliefs of the Christian faith. The High Middle Ages transformed belief in witchcraft into one of great unease regarding sorcery, which was newly considered to be diabolical and heretical. Christians were always fearful of magic and sorcery; however, a widespread increase in writings on witchcraft in the High Middle Ages resulted in the belief that all enchantment was heresy. Although an increased quantity of detailed texts on witchcraft appeared in the Later Middle Ages, the Early and High Middle Ages are still rich with

⁴⁰ Pope Gregory IX, *Vox in Rama*, in *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700*, ed. Kors and Peters, 115-116 at 115-116.

⁴¹ Pope Alexander IV, *Sorcery and the Inquisitors*, in *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700*, ed. Kors and Peters, 116-118 at 117-118.

evidence of pagan ritual and witchcraft. The sources available demonstrate the increase in witchcraft and the shift of magic from pagan rituals to diabolical spells and sacrifices. Evidence from the Middle Ages allows insight into the dangerous and anxiety-inspiring occurrences in Europe and helps modern-day readers understand where the horrifying legends of witches originate. However, for medieval people, witchcraft was not merely a legend, but a reality of life to which anyone could easily fall victim if he or she were not strong in their Roman Catholic faith.

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