Deep Roots:
Medieval Witchcraft and its Folkloric Origins

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Medieval witchcraft has been a topic that draws in scholars, history enthusiasts, and the common person alike, but one thing stands in the way of fully understanding this phenomenon: a lack of evidence from one side. When researchers find a mountain of sources from clergy leaders, theological scholars, and popes themselves, but little to no writings from laypeople or even those persecuted relating to witchcraft, many doubt how "real" witchcraft trials and accusations were. Some historians theorize that the inquisitors invented the idea witchcraft. Michael Bailey, a leading medievalist, explains this idea in his book *Battling Demons*.[1] Others, such as Carlo Ginzburg, another leading medievalist, believe that the origins of witchcraft root far back into pagan religion and folklore.[2] These diverse arguments maintain validity so long as historians lack sources about witchcraft aside from theological accusers. The idea of witchcraft most likely emerged from a slow transition from pagan religions and folklore (both locally and widespread) to folklores mixing in with Christian mythology and demonology to eventual demonization by the Catholic Church.

Witchcraft and elements of witchcraft exist in writings before the medieval period. Ancient civilizations even had pagan goddesses who ruled over magic. Ancient Egypt had Isis, the goddess of magic and knowledge.[3] Ancient Greece associated Hecate (sometimes spelled Hekate) with witchcraft as well as well-known elements of witchcraft, such as the moon and necromancy.[4] Still within Greek mythology, in *Medea* by Euripides, Medea worshiped Hecate and practiced what medieval scholars would have called witchcraft. She curses her husband Jason, kills her children, and poisons Jason's bride as well as poisoning the bride's father in the process.[5] Michael Bailey, though a modern medievalist, assigns the term "witch" to Medea and too another figure of Greek mythos: Circe, a temptress who lured men to her and in turn would kill them.[6] Coming later, in C.E. 61, the Romans attacked the Isle of Anglesey. Tacitus wrote, "between the ranks dashed women, in black attire like the Furies, with hair dishevelled, waving brands. All around, the Druids,

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[1] Michael Bailey, *Battling Demons Witchcraft, Heresy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971).

[2] Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

[3] Geraldine Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology: A Guide to Gods, Goddesses, and Traditions of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford University Press: 2002), 151.

[4] Richard Cavendish, *The Powers of Evil in Western Religion, Magic, and Folk Belief* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1975), 62.

[5] Euripides, *The Medea*, trans. by Rex Warner, in *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, vol. 1, ed. David Greene and Richmond Lattimore (University of Chicago Press: 1960), 95.

[6] Michael Bailey, "From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Witchcraft in the Later Middle Ages," *Speculum*, vol. 76 no. 4 (October 2001): 960-990, 962.

lifting up their hands to heaven, and pouring forth dreadful imprecation . . . They deemed it indeed a duty to cover their altars with the blood of captives and to consult their deities through human entrails."[7] All of these examples of magic come before the Western Roman Empire collapsed, and some long before the Roman Empire was even established. All these depictions of magic involved women, which holds some significance considering that the late medieval period often targeted women in witchcraft trials. Looking at these depictions of magic, they align well with the medieval idea of witchcraft. It could be just a coincidence, but history tends to influence the present, so that means these depictions of magic throughout Classical writings could have influenced what the idea of medieval witchcraft would become. Especially in the writing by Tacitus, considering how his writing is the closest to the medieval period, some of that druid culture may have wandered into local medieval culture.

Witchcraft has been mentioned in medieval European writings throughout history. Before the 1300s, most theological scholars associated magic and sorcery more with the pagan Roman goddess Diana, rather than with the Devil (though he was not omitted from their complaints). Rarely did these texts use the term "witchcraft," but they described practices that would be synonymous with witchcraft in the latter centuries of the Middle Ages. Regino of Prüm, in *Canon Episcopi* (906 A.D.), claimed not only that "*sortilegium* and *maleficium* . . . was invented by the devil,"[8] but also that women "ride upon certain beasts with Diana."[9] For brief context, *sortilegium* refers to the practice of divination and *maleficium* refers to harmful magic. This writing from Regino of Prüm demonstrates the association of existing pagan religious practices with the Devil. Burchard of Worms complains about magicians and oracles, in the *Corrector sive Medicus* (1008-12 A.D.), making associating with them punishable by varying degrees. "[S]ome women, turned back after Satan, seduced by illusions and phantoms of demons, believe and affirm: that with Diana, a goddess of pagans, and an unnumbered multitude of women, they ride on certain beasts and traverse many areas of the earth and the stillness of the quiet night, obey her commands as if she were their mistress, and were called on special nights to her service."[10] Once again, this writing that came from a religious figure associated an older pagan religion with the Devil. Another document still, *The Golden Legend* written by Jacobus de Voragine in 1270, tells the life of St. Justina. St. Justina lived in the late 3rd century, dying in 304.[11] Her story includes a man named

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[7] Tacitus, "The Roman Assault on the Isle of Anglesey (61 A.D.)," in *Complete Works of Tacitus*, trans. Alfred John Church, ed. William Jackson Brodribb and Sara Bryant (New York: Random House, 1942), chpts. 29-30.

[8] Regino of Prüm, "A Warning to Bishops: the *Canon Episcopi* (ca. 906)," in *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 60-63 at 61.

[9] Regino of Prüm, "A Warning to Bishops: the *Canon Episcopi* (ca. 906)," 62.

[10] Burchard of Worms, "The *Corrector sive Medicus* (ca. 1008-1012)," in *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, 2nd ed., 63-67 at 65.

[11] Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese, "St. Justine of Nicomedia," Accessed April 8, 2023, http://ww1.antiochian.org/node/16769#:~:text=Justina%20of%20Nicomedia,-

Cyprian, who " . . . had been a magician from childhood: when he was seven years old, his parents consecrated him to the devil."[12] All of these writings mention magic via the Devil and demons long before the inquisitors, weakening the argument that the concept of witchcraft was a 15th-century inquisitorial invention. Another important thing to note is that while the earlier writings (in 906 and 1012) mention Diana, the goddess of pagans, Jacobus de Voragine only mentions the Devil and demons in his 1270 writing.

Medieval scholars, much like modern-day historians, attempted to explain whence witchcraft originated. The *Malleus maleficarum*, a compilation of witchcraft practices and legal proceedings written in 1487, mentions elements of witchcraft originating long before even the birth of Jesus Christ. The authors, Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, even mention "witches who lived in the olden times, about 1400 years before the Incarnation of Our Lord."[13] They further their claim by explaining Incubi and Succubi, demons who modern medieval witches worked with and who forced themselves upon these "olden" witches. They assert that " . . . no one who reads the histories can doubt . . . that Incubus and Succubus devils have always existed."[14] These two assertions, coming from the first known compilation of witch's beliefs that Christians used for centuries afterwards, hold a significant amount of merit to support the argument that witchcraft was not simply a late-medieval idea. Kramer and Sprenger were not the first to assert that witchcraft is an older system. Around 1120, Hugh of St. Victor wrote the *Didascalicon*, in which he attempts to give a basic overview of magic, the main types of magic, and magic's history. He claims that "the first discoverer of magic is believed to have been Zoroaster."[15] As a prophet, Zoroaster's teachings make up Zoroastrianism, a monotheistic Middle-Eastern religion that emphasizes the constant battle between good and evil.[16] The only problem is that scholars do not know when Zoroaster lived. Even so, "At present [1991], the majority opinion among scholars probably inclines toward the end of the second millennium [BCE] or the beginning of the first,

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Commemorated%20on%20October&text=The%20holy%20Virgin%20Martyr%20Justina,in%20the%20late%20third%20century.

[12] Jacobus de Voragine, "The Life of St. Justina, from *The Golden Legend* (1270)," trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton, 1993), In *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, 2nd ed., 81-86 at 83.

[13] Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger. "The *Malleus maleficarum* (1487)," trans. Montague Summers (London, 1928), in *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, 2nd ed., 180-229 at 196.

[14] Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, "The *Malleus maleficarum*," 197.

[15] Hugh of St. Victor, "The *Didascalicon* VI.15 (Appendix B) (ca. 1120)," trans. Jerome Taylor (New York, 1961), in *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, 2nd ed., 67-70 at 68.

[16] Douglas A. Fox, "Darkness and Light: the Zoroastrian View," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 35 no. 2 (June 1967), 129-137, 129.

although there are still those who hold for a date in the seventh century [BCE]."[17] No matter either of these claims, this puts the origins of magic hundreds of years before the birth of Christ. Both Kramer and Sprenger and Hugh of St. Victor agree that witchcraft first arose at some point before the birth of Christ, which aligns with the argument that the medieval idea of witchcraft may have originated in pre-Christian pagan or folkloric roots.

Medieval theological scholars differentiated between magic associated with local folklore and magic associated with demons and the Devil. Some people, usually conquered peoples, worshiped and practiced their local folklores and traditions alongside Christianity. Authorities considered this "low magic." Others worshiped demons and devils, turning their back against Christianity. This was called "high magic."[18] Once again, there is demonstration of both folkloric and Christian elements within theological beliefs on witchcraft and magic. In time, church authorities would distinguish between folk magic and the belief and practice of witchcraft, which carried far more severe penalties.

For much of the Middle Ages, witchcraft and heresy were not synonymous. Heresy could be punished by life in jail or even death, but not witchcraft. The clergy received responsibility for keeping witchcraft at bay. Regino of Prüm, in the *Canon Episcopi*, warns that "Bishops and the officials and clergy of bishops must labor with all their strength so that the pernicious art of *sortilegium* and *maleficium*, which was invented by the devil is eradicated from their districts, and if they find a man or women follower of this wicked sect to eject them foully disgraced from their parishes."[19] However, when Pope Gregory XI decreed that witchcraft was inherently heresy, inquisitors could legally put witches on trial.[20] This permission would later be confirmed by Pope Innocent VIII in 1484 in his papal bull, *Summis desiderantes affectibus*: "[D]esiring . . . to remove all impediments by which in any way the said inquisitors are hindered in the exercise of their office, and to prevent the taint of heretical pravity, . . . do hereby decree, by virtue of our apostolic authority, that it shall be permitted to the said inquisitors in these regions to exercise their office of inquisition and to proceed to the correction, imprisonment, and punishment of the aforesaid persons [witches] for their said offenses and crimes."[21] The fact that inquisitors had to be given specific instruction whether or not they could persecute witchcraft shows that they did not invent the concept of medieval witchcraft. For inquisitors to even want to go after witches, the idea of

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[17] Bruce Lincoln, *Death, War, and Sacrifice: Studies in Ideology and Practice* (University of Chicago Press: 1991), 149-150.

[18] J. Michael Raley, "The Meaning of Witchcraft," HIS260J: Medieval Witchcraft, class lecture at Hanover College, IN, January 17, 2023.

[19] Regino of Prüm, "A Warning to Bishops: the *Canon Episcopi* (ca. 906)," 61.

[20] Pope Gregory XI, "Letter of August 14, 1374," *in Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Hexenwahns und der Hexenverfolgung im Mittelalter*, ed. Joseph Hansen (Bonn : C. Georgi, 1901), 15-16 (doc. 23). Trans. J. Michael Raley.

[21] Pope Innocent VIII, "*Summis desiderantas affectibus* (1484)," *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, 2nd ed., 177-180 at 179.

witchcraft needed to have been established, even more so for papal authority to have decided that witches were enough of a threat to give the inquisitors permission to put the witches on trial.

Finally, the most important late medieval documents on witchcraft include Johannes Nider's *Formicarius* (1435-38) and the above-mentioned *Malleus maleficarum*. Many scholars, including Michael Bailey, argue that the idea of witchcraft started with Nider and the *Formicarius*. The *Formicarius* ties together many elements of previous witchcraft documents prior to the publication of the *Malleus maleficarum*. Nider describes witches shapeshifting into animals, flying, consuming infants, and controlling the weather.[22] The most significant point of the *Formicarius*, though, is that it led to the eventual writing of the *Malleus maleficarum*. Like the *Formicarius*, the *Malleus maleficarum* chiefly accuses women of witchcraft, including having two sections that are titled "Why it is that Women are chiefly addicted to Evil Superstitions" and "Why Superstition is chiefly found in Women."[23] This lines up with most pre-Christian depictions of magic mainly show women practicing some type of wicked or magical art. So, some sort of correlation exists between pre-Christian and medieval depictions of magic.

Images that align with theological scholars' depictions of witchcraft come from pre-medieval, and even pre-Christian culture and literature. In fact, early medieval scholars included Diana, the goddess of pagans, within their depictions of magic, of course alongside the Devil and demons. Eventually, though, Diana phased out of the literature on witchcraft, instead the Devil and demons being the sole cause of witchcraft. Medieval authorities on witchcraft claim that the practice came hundreds of years before Christ himself. The medieval concept of witchcraft must have developed at least from some element within pagan and folkloric culture, or else these elements would not have come through in medieval documentation, especially the *Malleus maleficarum*. Moving further, the understanding of the demonization of existing cultural religions and folklores by the medieval Catholic Church provides insight into the persecutory rhetoric that would follow Christian culture into the Renaissance and well afterward.

[22] Johannes Nider, "The *Formicarius* (1435-38)," in *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, 2nd ed., 155-59 at 158.

[23] Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger. "The *Malleus maleficarum*," 181.

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