

# Witchcraft

Witchcraft, exercise of supposed supernatural powers by people who call themselves witches. Witches are assumed to be servants of the devil and in this respect differ from sorcerers, wizards, warlocks, conjurers, and other practitioners of black magic, who have supposedly learned to master the devil. Witchcraft is worldwide in scope but has had greatly varying roles at different times and places.

## **Presuppositions**

Witchcraft depends on certain presuppositions. These include the beliefs that the devil and his subordinates, such as demons, imps, incubi, and succubi (see Demon), are real and have power in the world; that people can have physical relations with them; and that contracts between people and demons can be enforced.

In return for serving the devil according to contract, witches allegedly receive certain powers, notably to cause or cure illness or transfer it from one person to another; to raise storms and to make rain or, sometimes, to cause drought; to produce impotence in men and sterility in women; and to cause crops to fail, animals to be barren, and milk to go sour. They are believed able to arouse love through the use of philters and potions and to destroy love by charms and spells; and to do harm or even bring about death by a glance (the so-called evil eye) or by sticking pins into a wax image of the victim. They supposedly can become invisible and fly, sometimes with the aid of a broom or special ointments. Witches allegedly foretell the future; animate inanimate objects, revive the dead, and conjure up other spirits; and transform themselves and others into animals, particularly cats and wolves (see Werewolf).

## **Traditional Organization and Practice**

According to most authorities, witches in Europe in medieval times and later were organized into covens of 12 members, mainly but not exclusively females, and a leader, usually a male. The leader was the vicar of the devil and was regarded by many of his simpler worshippers as the devil himself. Traditionally, he is represented as dressed all in black or in the guise of a goat, stag, or other horned animal. The coven assembled once or twice a week in what was generally a local gathering. At these meetings, the witches performed acts of devil worship, reported on their activities, and made plans for the coming week. Larger regional meetings, called Sabbats, would draw hundreds, sometimes thousands, of joyous revelers, including witches and their uninitiated followers.

The most celebrated witch's meeting place in ancient and medieval Europe was Brocken, the highest peak in the Harz Mountains of Germany, the scene of the Sabbat so vividly described in Goethe's *Faust*. The two most important Sabbats were held on the night of April 30 (Roodmas or Walpurgis Night) and the night of October 31 (Halloween). Sabbats were celebrated also on the nights of July 31 (Lammas) and February 1 (Candlemas) and probably on other nights.

The opening procedure at a Sabbat was the initiation of new members. The initiation ceremony supposedly involved taking the oath of obedience to the devil, signing contracts with him in blood, and desecrating crucifixes and other sacred objects; assignment of a familiar, in the form of a cat, mouse, weasel, toad, or other small animal, to do the bidding of the witch; and various obscene acts of obeisance to the devil and his vicar. Initiation was followed by general worship, including frequently the Black Mass, which was a travesty of the Roman Catholic Mass (see Black Mass; Satanism). Worship blended into dancing, which became increasingly wild and indecent. The Sabbat ended in a sexual orgy.

## **History**

From what is known of the Sabbat and from other evidence, most contemporary scholars have come to the conclusion that witchcraft was the survival of an ancient folk religion, essentially a fertility cult, that prevailed throughout Europe before the advent of Christianity. According to this theory, the old religion continued to exist alongside Christianity through medieval times, although constantly losing adherents and importance. As Christianity gained the ascendancy, it persuaded most people to regard the gods of the old religion as devils. Those who continued to practice the old religion became witches in the eyes of ecclesiastical authorities and orthodox Christians.

### **In the Ancient World**

The belief in magical practices, through the agency of spirits and demons, was almost universal in ancient times. Egyptian records tell of conjurers and soothsayers who derived their powers from alien gods or devils. In the Egyptian account of the encounter between Moses and Pharaoh, Moses appears as a practitioner of black magic and his followers as servants of an alien and abhorrent God; accordingly they are witches. In the biblical account of the same episode, the Egyptian experts who competed with Moses appear as evil sorcerers. The biblical injunction "You shall not permit a sorceress to live" (Exodus 22:18) was one of the main justifications of the witch persecutions of later days. An even earlier prohibition of witchcraft is contained in the Code of Hammurabi. Witchcraft continued to flourish, however, and Chaldeans, Egyptians, and other Eastern peoples were known for their mastery of the black art.

Witches and magicians figured significantly too in the civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome; Thessaly, in Greece, was a particularly important center of the black magic. The first major witch-hunt in the modern sense occurred in ad 367 by order of the Roman emperor Valerian.

In its early period, the Christian church was lenient toward witchcraft. Persons proved to have practiced it were required only to do penance. Clergymen, still struggling to consolidate the power of the church, recognized that all-out conflict with the extremely numerous devotees of the old religion would be disastrous. They therefore tolerated the old worship and, according to reliable records, frequently participated.

## **Christian Opposition**

The attitude of the church began to stiffen as it grew strong enough to fight openly against the already disintegrating old faith. Also, growing social unrest during the later Middle Ages and early modern times found expression in witchcraft as well as in heresy and secularism. Because those tendencies threatened to undermine ecclesiastical authority, church authorities treated secularism as heresy, identified heresy with witchcraft, and attempted to destroy all three. The most influential papal bull against witchcraft was the *Summis Desiderantes* promulgated by Pope Innocent VIII (1432-92) in 1484. To implement this bull, he appointed regional inquisitors.

The witch-hunting mania obsessed Europe from about 1050 to the end of the 17th century; it subsided occasionally but then attained greater fury. Children were encouraged to inform against parents, husbands against wives, relatives and neighbors against one another. Witnesses were paid to testify. Inhuman tortures were inflicted to force confessions. The inquisitors did not hesitate to betray promises of pardon to those acknowledging guilt. A class of professional witch finders arose who collected charges and then tested the accused for evidences of witchcraft. They were paid a fee for each conviction. The most common test was pricking. All witches were supposed to have somewhere on their bodies a mark, made by the devil, that was insensitive to pain. If such a spot was found, it was regarded as proof of witchcraft. Among other proofs were additional breasts, supposedly used to suckle familiars, inability to weep, and failure in the water test. In this last-named test, if a woman sank when thrown into a body of water, she was considered innocent; if she stayed afloat, she was guilty.

## **Modern Witchcraft**

Witchcraft in all parts of the world is essentially similar. The most important difference is that in many simple societies witches (called also witch doctors, medicine men, or shamans) have established and unchallenged roles in the community. They are assumed to derive their power from evil spirits, but these spirits are revered, or at least feared, by the community; persons who are thought to have access to the spirit world are regarded with reverence or fear. Witch doctors are depended on to cure the sick, make rain, and assure success in the hunt and in war; to exorcise demons that may possess members of the community and to propitiate demons that may otherwise turn hostile; and to smell out evil, denounce evildoers, and accomplish their ruin.

In India some tribes and members of the lower-castes commonly resort to witches and sorcerers. Even upper-caste Hindus may turn to them in time of drought and famine. Witches are an important part of daily life in Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia, and other parts of Asia. Witchcraft is widespread in Africa. The voodoo of Haiti and other Latin American countries is a form of witchcraft, as are the devil cults of the Solomon Islands and the New Hebrides.

In the U.S., belief in witchcraft endures among southern mountain people and other relatively isolated groups. Until recently the hex or witch was greatly feared in some parts of Pennsylvania, and farmers painted special designs on their barns to ward off witch-induced disasters. Even in large cities believers in the evil eye and other powers of witchcraft may still be found.

In recent years, public interest in various types of occultism has increased. Many books on witchcraft and astrology have been published, and persons purporting to be witches have appeared in Europe and the U.S.

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