THE GREAT EUROPEAN WITCH HUNT IN ELIZABETHAN ENGLAND AND
JACOBEAN SCOTLAND

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Abstract

The Great European Witch Hunt swept across Europe from the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, but the nature of these witch hunts differed from country to country. These differences can be attributed to the fulfillment, or lack thereof, of the preconditions to the Great European Witch Hunt: the adoption of the inquisitorial judicial procedure, the use of torture, the movement of witchcraft trials to secular and local courts, a belief in maleficium facilitated by a pact with Satan, a belief that witches met in large groups to perform anti-human rituals at the sabbat and the belief in the witch’s ability to fly to such Satanic meetings. These preconditions were largely fulfilled on the Continent, while they were only partially fulfilled in England and in Scotland, and more-so in Scotland than in England. The result is that the Great European Witch Hunt took a much more extreme form on the European Continent than it did in England or Scotland, and it was more severe in Scotland than in England.
Introduction

Europe was engulfed in a frenzy of witchcraft accusations, prosecutions and executions from the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries. It is estimated that 110,000 people were prosecuted as witches and that 60,000 of these people were executed in Europe during this time.¹ However, this Great European Witch Hunt was not one large, uniform pursuit of witches; rather, it was composed of a series of diverse local witch hunts, which in turn were composed of individual and distinct witchcraft trials. These local witch hunts varied from one another in the ideology behind them, the process of prosecution and the overall scale of the hunt. In order to understand why such differences occurred in local witch hunts, we must first understand a little more about the Great European Witch Hunt as a whole. In order for the Great European Witch Hunt to occur, there were a series of preconditions that needed to be fulfilled. These preconditions can roughly be divided into two categories: changes in judicial process and changes in beliefs regarding witches and witchcraft. It is important to note that while these changes in judicial process and witchcraft beliefs did not directly cause the Great European Witch Hunt, they were essential for it to have occurred.

Judicial changes such as the adoption of the inquisitorial procedure, the use of torture and the movement of witchcraft trials to secular and local courts were all preconditions to the Great European Witch Hunt. The Great European Witch Hunt was ultimately formed by a series of witchcraft trials and was consequently a largely judicial procedure. An appropriate judicial setting was therefore vital to the Great European Witch Hunt. The inquisitorial judicial procedure provided the courts with the power necessary to orchestrate the Great European Witch Hunt by

allowing them to initiate legal proceedings themselves, strip accused persons of their rights, try
them in secrecy and then play an active role in determining the outcome of the trial. The
adoption of the inquisitorial procedure, which required a confession from the accused for a
conviction, led directly to the use of torture. The use of torture facilitated the Great European
Witch Hunt by encouraging both contrived confessions to sensational crimes and the implication
of innocent persons as witches, which served to intensify witchcraft beliefs and expand the scale
of the witch hunts. Finally, the placement of witchcraft trials in local and secular courts enabled
the Great European Witch Hunt, as local authorities who were more likely to fear witchcraft and
abuse the system were backed by the full judicial power of the state. Though the Great European
Witch Hunt was largely a judicial phenomenon, it would be foolish to deny the role of the people
and their beliefs regarding witches witchcraft.

Changes in beliefs about witches and witchcraft, such as a belief in maleficium facilitated
by a pact with Satan, a belief that witches met in large groups to perform anti-human rituals at
the sabbat and the belief in the witch’s ability to fly to such Satanic congregations were all
preconditions to the Great European Witch Hunt. It was these beliefs regarding witches and
witchcraft held by the people of Europe that judicial systems relied on in order to identify, accuse
and prosecute witches. A shared set of witch and witchcraft beliefs held by the people were
therefore also necessary to the Great European Witch Hunt. Maleficium, a term used to describe
maleficent magic, was typically believed to be the cause behind various misfortunes, such as
storms, a poor crop, infertility, disease or even death. Maleficium was believed to be made
possible through a pact with Satan, and this belief created an image of a witch as not only
threatening to daily life but also to a harmonious Christian society, which helped to fuel the fear
that in turn fueled the Great European Witch Hunt. The witches’ sabbat was believed to be a gathering at which witches collectively worshipped Satan and participate in various obscene acts. This belief facilitated the Great European Witch Hunt by rendering witches as anti-human and making witchcraft a larger, collective operation. The Great European Witch Hunt was further facilitated when the conception of witchcraft as a larger, communal operation was completed by the belief that witches were able to fly, allowing them to travel long distances in short periods of time in order to congregate for the sabbat.

The witch hunt in England under Queen Elizabeth I was tame in comparison to those in other European countries in the same time period, despite the fact that Elizabeth, along with English authorities, believed her life to be threatened by witchcraft. Elizabeth’s ascension to the English throne meant the relinquishment of the Catholic hold on England. As a result, there were many Catholic plots against her life. These conspirators were particularly drawn to the use of witchcraft against Elizabeth, as it was believed to be both effective and difficult to detect. The use of witchcraft against Elizabeth was therefore much feared, and all Catholics were suspect. In November of 1558, Sir Anthony Fortescue, part of a well-known Catholic family, was arrested along with his accomplices for casting a horoscope of the Queen’s life. He was soon released but was taken into custody again in 1561 with his two brothers-in-law, Edmund and Arthur Pole. John Prestall and Edmund Cosyn, two conjurers employed by Fortescue, had used a spirit to discover that Queen Elizabeth I would soon die a natural death. It was planned that Edmund Pole would then marry the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots, who would be proclaimed Queen of a

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3 Ibid., 25.
restored Catholic England. With the exception of Fortescue, possibly due to his high social status, all involved were put to death. This was the most prominent of many conspiracies that involved witchcraft to threaten the Queen’s life.

The witch hunt in Scotland under King James VI was more subdued than elsewhere in Europe at the time, despite the fact that James VI and his wife, Princess Ann, were believed to have had their lives threatened by witchcraft. During James VI’s rule, there was widespread discontent amongst the Scottish people, and there were many plots and rumors of plots against James’s life. In 1589, James VI of Scotland married Princess Ann of Denmark. When they sailed to Scotland, they were met with a large storm, which was believed to be the work of Satan. A maidservant by the name of Geillis Duncane was tortured until she confessed to having been allured to witchcraft by the Devil and named many other witches, including Agnis Sampson, Agnes Tompson and Doctor Fian. These witches were all tortured until a treacherous plot was revealed. Over two hundred witches were said to have met by the sea on Halloween in 1589. At this meeting, the witches swore allegiance to Satan and then raised a great storm in order to kill King James VI. Geillis, Agnis, Agnes, Dr. Fian and at least one hundred other accused witches were executed in relation to this plot. James VI was so affected by this plot against his life that he even wrote a witchcraft treatise, Daemonologie, in order to “resolue the doubting harts of

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5 Ibid., 94.
7 Ibid., 92.
8 Ibid., 93 and 96.
many; both that such assaultes of Sathan are most certainly practized, & that the instrumentes thereof, merits most severly to be punished”9.

Despite the fact that both Queen Elizabeth I of England and King James VI of Scotland believed their lives to be in grave danger due to witchcraft, witch hunts were not as severe in these two countries when compared to those on the European Continent. This curious reality may be explained by a closer examination of the preconditions of the Great European Witch Hunt: the adoption of the inquisitorial procedure, the use of torture, the movement of witchcraft trials to secular and local courts, a belief in maleficium facilitated by a pact with Satan, a belief that witches met in large groups to perform anti-human rituals at the sabbat and the belief in the witch’s ability to fly in order to attend such Satanic meetings. These preconditions were largely fulfilled on the Continent, while they were at best only partially satisfied in England and in Scotland. Additionally, they were more completely fulfilled in Scotland than in England, just as witch hunts were more severe in Scotland than in England. It is therefore the fulfillment of these preconditions, which were necessary for the occurrence of the Great European Witch Hunt, that may account for differences in local witch hunts.

The Establishment of the Inquisitorial Judicial Procedure

The inquisitorial judicial procedure had begun to replace the accusatorial judicial procedure on the Continent in thirteenth century, which provided the judicial system with the power needed to conduct the Great European Witch Hunt. Under the accusatorial procedure, a trial would begin when one party initiated legal proceedings against another party. However,

9 James VI, Daemonologie, xi.
under the inquisitorial procedure, the courts were able to initiate legal proceedings themselves, which took power away from the people and placed it in the hands of the judicial system alone. Additionally, in the accusatorial procedure, the trial would remain a public contest between the two parties involved. In the inquisitorial procedure, on the other hand, proceedings were held in secrecy and the accused were rarely allowed the council of a lawyer. When the accused were granted access to a lawyer, they were generally urged to simply confess, regardless of their innocence.

This secrecy of the proceedings and lack of rights of the accused again provided the courts with power that was oftentimes abused. Furthermore, under the inquisitorial procedure, the accuser did not have to face the accused or fear a penalty for a false accusation. This encouraged the persistence of false accusations motivated by revenge. Finally, under the accusatorial procedure, it was believed that God ultimately determined the outcome of the trial. Under the inquisitorial procedure, however, the courts believed that it was their role to determine the outcome of the case. This again provided the courts with more power, and it also encouraged them to influence the outcome of the case to suit their needs, which generally resulted in increased rates of conviction.

The replacement of the accusatorial procedure with the inquisitorial judicial procedure can largely be attributed to the Papal Inquisition, a Roman Catholic institution established in the thirteenth century in order to facilitate the prosecution of heretics. The Papal Inquisition carried out inquisitions, or official enquiries, against heretics using the inquisitorial procedure. In this way, the inquisitorial procedure became aimed at


\[13\] Ibid., 73.
stomping out heresy, and by extension, witchcraft, with the support and approval from the all-powerful Catholic Church.\textsuperscript{14}

The inquisitorial judicial procedure was not adopted in England, which allowed the people to maintain some power in their judicial system and thereby deprived the courts of the power necessary to conduct mass witch hunts. The English judicial system utilized a jury composed of lay jurymen. It was these lay jurymen, rather than men trained in the law, who were able to initiate legal proceedings and determine their outcomes.\textsuperscript{15} This kept the power that the courts held on the Continent in the hands of the English people. In England, if the people were to object to a witch hunt for whatever reason, they had the power, through the jury system, to refuse to initiate any more cases or to find the accused innocent in order to stop the witch hunt. It is important to note, however, that the power that the people had was concentrated in the hands of men, while it was women who were primarily targeted by the witch hunts. In the English judicial system, trials were also able to remain a public contest between the two parties involved.\textsuperscript{16} The public nature of English trials helped to prevent the misconduct, such as the manipulation of the accused by the courts, that oftentimes facilitated witch hunts. The English judicial system, unlike the inquisitorial judicial system on the Continent, provided the people with enough power to prevent the courts from having complete control, which helped to subdue witch hunts there.

In Scotland, a hybrid of the inquisitorial judicial procedure and the English judicial model was in use, which helped facilitate witch hunts that were of a smaller scale than on the Continent but a larger scale than in England. The Scottish judicial system resembled the inquisitorial

\textsuperscript{14}Cohn, \textit{Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt}, 24.

\textsuperscript{15}Levack, \textit{The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe}, 73.

\textsuperscript{16}See note 15 above.
judicial procedure by allowing the courts to initiate legal proceedings\textsuperscript{17}, and by extension the courts had the power to instigate witch hunts. However, like the English judicial system, the Scottish judicial system utilized juries composed of lay jurymen to determine the outcome of trials.\textsuperscript{18} Although the people did not have the power to refuse to initiate witchcraft trials in order to prevent a witch hunt in the Scottish judicial system, they did have the power to find the accused innocent in order to bring a witch hunt to an early end. However, like in England, this power was in the hands of men, rather than the women who were the primary victims of the witch hunts. Trials were also able to remain a public contest between two parties in Scotland, which inhibited the manipulation by the courts that fueled witch hunts.\textsuperscript{19} The Scottish judicial system combined elements of the inquisitorial judicial procedure of the Continent and the English judicial system, which provided the courts with the power to facilitate witch hunts but also provided the people with the power to end them. This resulted in witch hunts that were more limited than those of the Continent but still more widespread than in England.

The Use of Torture

The practice of torturing the accused in order to extract a confession was adopted on the Continent in the thirteenth century, which encouraged forced confessions to extraordinary acts and the accusations against neighbors that expanded the scale of witch hunts, both of which fueled the Great European Witch Hunt. The Catholic Church had banned torture across Europe until it became necessary in successfully prosecuting witches due to the adoption of the

\textsuperscript{17} Levack, \textit{The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe}, 74.

\textsuperscript{18} See note 17 above.

\textsuperscript{19} Levack, \textit{The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe}, 73.
inquisitorial procedure in the thirteenth century. Under the inquisitorial procedure, either two eyewitness accounts or a confession were required for a conviction. Eyewitness accounts were understandably difficult to obtain in trials of witchcraft, due to the nature of the crime. This fact encouraged the courts to resort to employing torture in order to obtain confessions from the accused. Torture was particularly brutal in witchcraft cases due to the fear that witches would use their magic to withstand the pain. The use of torture in the inquisitorial judicial procedure gave the courts even more power over the accused. The accused were more likely to confess to the crimes that they were accused of when tortured. Additionally, the courts were able to manipulate the accused into confessing to particularly obscene acts, which contributed to more vivid beliefs about witches and also increased the fear of witchcraft amongst the common people. The courts were also able to manipulate the accused into implicating innocent persons as witches, which expanded the scale of witchcraft trials. The use of torture in witchcraft trials contributed to the Great European Witch Hunt by encouraging a greater fear of witchcraft, expanding on stereotypes about witches and making witchcraft trials larger operations.

In contrast, torture was not used at all in England, which restricted the absurdity of the acts attributed to witches and also contained the scale of witchcraft trials. The fact that torture was unreliable in determining the truth was already well established in Europe, as torture had been banned in Europe by the Catholic Church until it became necessary to prosecute witches in the thirteenth century. Because the inquisitorial procedure was never adopted in England,

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21 Ibid., 75.

22 Ibid., 81.

23 Ibid., 78.
however, there was no need for the use of torture on the accused. Torture therefore remained illegal and was only allowed under the command of the Privy Council or when the security of the state was believed to be at risk. Witches were therefore not tortured into confessing to heinous crimes invented by the courts or implicating innocent people as accomplices. This helped to tame beliefs about witches and constrain the scale of witch hunts.

The torture of the accused was technically forbidden but still used in Scotland, which facilitated witch hunts that were of a smaller scale than on the Continent but a larger scale than in England. The inquisitorial procedure was never fully adopted in Scotland, so the use of torture on the accused was not necessary. Like in England, torture remained illegal and was only allowed under the command of the Privy Council or when the security of the state was believed to be at risk. However, unlike in England, the prosecution and torture of witches was encouraged in Scotland, despite laws restricting such practices. As members of the General Assembly, the Scottish clergy applied pressure to the courts to prosecute, and therefore torture, witches. Witches were also prosecuted in Scotland in the pursuit of the approval of King James VI. King James VI of Scotland took a particular interest in witchcraft after he believed that his life was threatened by such magic. In 1597, he wrote an influential treatise against witchcraft, *Daemonologie*, in which he propagated his belief that witches “ought to be put to death according to the Law of God, the ciuill and imperial law, and municipall law of all Christian nations ... no sexe, age nor ranck to be exempted”.

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25 See note 24 above.
28 James VI, *Daemonologie*, 77.
in encouraging the prosecution of witches and use of torture, such as through the Privy Council’s
general commission for examining witches, which was passed in October of 1591. This
commission provided six people: two lawyers, two ministers and two Edinburgh burgesses, with
the power to examine all cases of witchcraft in Scotland. The commission not only concentrated
immense power into the hands of only a few individuals, but it specifically encouraged the use of
torture against accused witches.\textsuperscript{29} The motivation to prosecute witches manifested itself through
the use of torture on any accused of the crime of witchcraft. Witches were therefore tortured into
confessing to elaborate crimes and providing the names of accomplices. This contributed to the
proliferation of even more gruesome beliefs regarding witches and also spurred witch hunts of a
larger scale than those in England, though witch hunting was still more severe on the Continent.

The Movement of Witchcraft Trials to Local, Secular Courts

The movement of witchcraft trials to local, secular courts beginning on the Continent in
the thirteenth century provided the ideology, power and tools the courts required in order to
conduct the Great European Witch Hunt. Witchcraft trials began to be held in local courts more
often than in central courts because local authorities were more likely to develop an intense fear
of witchcraft and because they were less committed to adhering to a proper procedure of
prosecution.\textsuperscript{30} This placed witchcraft trials in an environment where the crime of witchcraft was
taken very seriously while the rights of the accused were not, which resulted in a particularly
harsh treatment of witches. In addition to being moved to local courts, witchcraft trials were
increasingly held in secular courts during this time. Witchcraft was increasingly declared a

\textsuperscript{30} Levack, \textit{The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe}, 93-94.
secular crime due to the fear that it inspired. Such a fear toward witches and witchcraft as a serious threat to society was encouraged by *Malleus Maleficarum* and other witchcraft treatise that emphasized the necessity of prosecuting and punishing witches.\(^{31}\) The unwillingness of the Church to utilize torture and the reluctance of clerics to involve themselves with the abuses of the courts hindered the prosecution of witches in religious courts and thereby also encouraged the movement of witchcraft trials into secular courts.\(^{32}\) The scale of witch hunts increased when the full judicial power of the state was used to prosecute witches.\(^{33}\) The movement of witchcraft trials into local, secular courts provided significant power to an environment that was particularly unfavorable toward accused witches, all of which acted to facilitate the Great European Witch Hunt.

Witchcraft trials in England were held in secular but central courts, which helped to prevent the abuse of the system that enabled witch hunts. Though English witchcraft trials were held in secular courts, which increased the power of the movement to prosecute witches and allowed for the widespread use of torture on the Continent, it did not have the same effect in England. This is because the judicial system in England prevented authorities from having the power to prosecute witches on their own, and there was no large source of pressure to prosecute witches. Additionally, witchcraft trials in England were typically held in central courts with a high level of centralized power.\(^{34}\) This meant that the courts were more likely to follow the law regarding matters such as torture, and the system was less likely to be abused.\(^{35}\)


\(^{33}\) Ibid., 84-85.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 96.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 97.
were therefore less likely to be manipulated by the courts and, because torture was illegal in England, were not tortured into making false confessions or implicating innocent persons. The degree of central power governing witchcraft trials in England therefore acted to stem the abuses of the courts and subsequently the scale of witch hunts.

Witchcraft trials in Scotland were held in secular courts, both local and centralized, which resulted in conditions that were not as severe as on the Continent yet not as controlled as in England. Scottish witchcraft trials were held in secular courts, which increased the power of the movement to prosecute witches. This is because the Scottish judicial system provided authorities with the power to prosecute witches themselves, and they faced pressure to do so from authorities such as King James VI. The movement to prosecute witches therefore increased in momentum when the responsibility of prosecuting witches was given to secular courts. Additionally, witchcraft trials in Scotland were held in local courts more often than in England, and even the central courts in Scotland did not have a high level of centralized power that they did in England. This lack of central power meant that regulations were less likely to be followed and the system was more likely to be abused. While the courts, due to the public nature of witchcraft trials, were limited in their ability to manipulate accused witches in Scotland, regulations regarding torture were not followed. Though torture was subject to the same laws in Scotland as it was in England, it was not practiced in the latter but was practiced regularly in the former. The use of secular courts and lack of central power governing witchcraft trials in Scotland provided power to courts that sometimes abused the system, which allowed for witchcraft trials that were more severe than in England yet more tame than on the Continent.

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The Belief in Maleficium Derived from a Pact with Satan

Witchcraft beliefs regarding maleficium and diabolism merged together on the Continent in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and in this way, the witch began to be considered a dangerous servant of Satan, which was an essential belief to the Great European Witch Hunt. Maleficium, or maleficent magic, was typically believed to be the cause behind various misfortunes, such as storms, a poor crop, infertility, disease or even death. Diabolism refers to Devil worship, which in this particular set of beliefs took the form of a pact with Satan. The common people of Europe were oftentimes more concerned with maleficium than diabolism, as maleficium was believed to impact their daily lives in the form of daily misfortunes. Church and judicial authorities, on the other hand, were oftentimes more concerned with diabolism, which was believed to pose a threat to a harmonious Christian society. 37 However, beginning in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a witch was believed to practice both maleficium and diabolism. At this time, the Catholic Church was facing a mounting struggle against ritual magic, in which demons were not worshipped but commanded, typically by a man, through the power of God. 38 However, Thomas Aquinas argued against ritual magic by maintaining that demons do not work for men without receiving something in return, indicating that all magicians have pacts with the Devil. 39 This fueled the belief that Satan, in the form of a man, would approach a potential witch, who was typically an elderly widow who was unpopular with her neighbors and had no one to turn to. Satan would then console the woman and promise her money, and in some cases frighten

38 Cohn, Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt, 169.
her, in order to extract a promise of her servitude before engaging in painful copulation with her. The new witch was forced to renounce Christianity; she was re-baptized into Satan’s service and marked by his claws. Through this pact, Satan supplied the witch with the supernatural powers necessary to perform the maleficium that he required of her. The witch now had the power to harm her neighbors’ cattle or crop or cause them infertility, illness or death. However, witches were believed to specialize in killing babies and small children and either cannibalizing their corpses or using the bodies to cast spells.\textsuperscript{40} Witches were now believed to be dangerous Satanic forces set upon upturning the society in which they lived, which provided people at all levels of society with the motivation to support the Great European Witch Hunt.

The belief in witches who practiced both maleficium and diabolism and therefore posed a multifaceted threat to society was not completely accepted in England and Scotland, which allowed the witch hunts there to be more subdued than on the Continent. Witchcraft beliefs had a tendency to reach the British Isles a century after they had already been established on the Continent.\textsuperscript{41} When the belief in witches as beings who practiced both maleficium and diabolism finally did reach England and Scotland, it was not adopted as completely as it was on the Continent. The witch’s use of maleficium was fully accepted in England and Scotland. Because the power in English and Scottish judicial systems lay largely with the people, and maleficium was largely a concern of the people, English and Scottish witchcraft beliefs typically revolved around maleficium. However, even authorities were concerned with maleficium more than they were concerned with diabolism in England and Scotland, as can be seen in the 1563 English and Scottish Witchcraft Statutes. The 1563 Witchcraft Statute in England depicts a concern primarily

\textsuperscript{40} Cohn, \textit{Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt}, 100.

\textsuperscript{41} Levack, \textit{The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe}, 200.
with a witch’s practice of maleficium, as it warns that “if any person or persons, after the said first day of June next coming, shall use, practise or exercise any witchcraft, enchantment, charm or sorcery, whereby any person shall happen to be wasted, consumed or lamed in his or her body or member, or whereby any goods or cattles of such person shall be destroyed, wasted or impaired”\(^{42}\), the witch would be punished by death, unless the crime did not result in death and was a first offense\(^{43}\). However, that is not to say that a belief in the witch’s pact with the Devil was not important. It was widely believed in Britain that “the ground of all the practices of witchcraft, is a league or covenant made between the witch and the devill: wherein they doe mutually bind themselves each to other”, as professed by William Perkins, one of the most prominent Protestant theologians of the time.\(^{44}\) Though beliefs in witches who practiced diabolism did exist in England and Scotland, a witch’s maleficium was of primary concern.\(^{45}\) An English or Scottish witch was therefore primarily a person who practiced harmful magic rather than a Satanic being intent upon destroying Christian society, which helped to keep witch hunts subdued in comparison with the Continent.

The Belief in the Witches’ Sabbat

The belief that witches attended the sabbat, in which they worshipped Satan collectively and engaged in a number of obscene rites, emerged in the twelfth century and served to depict witches as anti-human, which was essential to the Great European Witch Hunt. In the twelfth

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\(^{43}\) Ibid., 99-100.


century, monks felt increasingly threatened by the growth of heretical societies. In order to prevent the growth and encourage the suppression of such heretical groups, monks constructed a stereotype of heretics as secretive, nocturnal, sexually promiscuous Devil worshippers through the myth of the sabbat. The sabbat was believed to be presided over by the Devil in the form of a monstrous half-man half-goat with a harsh and terrible voice, who sat on a high ebony throne with light coming from his horns and flames from his eyes. The sabbat would begin at night, and the witches would kneel down and pray to Satan, renouncing the Christian faith, and then they would kiss him on his genitals or anus. The witches would then report for punishment, usually in the form of whippings. A parody of a Christian church service then began. Satan would preach a sermon, warning the witches against Christianity and promising them a paradise better than the Christian heaven. Satan would then receive offerings from the witches. The witches would take a parody of the Eucharist, which consisted of a bitter and hard to chew black substance and a jug of bilious black liquid. The witches would then feast on vile tasting meat and wine, as well as the flesh of babies. The witches would participate in a dance that transitioned into an orgy, in which acts such as sodomy and incest were permitted, and Satan would copulate with every individual present. Finally, the sabbat was brought to a close when Satan sent the witches home with instructions to perform every conceivable act of maleficium against their Christian neighbors. The myth of the sabbat created the stereotype of a witch as a nocturnal, secretive, cannibalistic, sexually promiscuous, anti-human Devil worshipper, providing people at all levels of society with the motivation to support the Great European Witch Hunt.

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48 Ibid., 102.
The belief that witches collectively attended the sabbat in order to worship Satan and perform a series of anti-human rites was only partially accepted in England and Scotland, allowing the witch hunts to be milder there. The sabbat was not featured in English or Scottish witchcraft trials until the seventeenth century, and even when it did emerge, it was an incomplete conception of the sabbat.\(^49\) The English and Scottish sabbat was not nearly as obscene as the sabbats that were believed to be held on the Continent. Sabbats held in Britain centered around eating, drinking, music, dancing and uproar.\(^50\) Marion Angus, a Scottish woman accused of witchcraft, confessed her experience at the sabbat, where she attended “a meitting in the Gallowhope in the night tym and yair had a peace of flesche lyke beiffe. And eftir they had all eattene of the samen The devill haveing ane bonnitt on his head Tooke Bessir Lacost by the hand and the rest having one another by the hand daunced in ane ring rownd about the broad stoun in the Gallowhope and sung ane to another and stayed ther anehoure. Then the devill bad them be honest to him and ane to another and then bade them guidnight”\(^51\). Sometimes the sabbat was used in order to perform maleficium communally in order to cause greater harm than could be inflicted alone.\(^52\) However, even in this more sinister version of the British sabbat, infant sacrifice is unheard of and formal Devil worship, communal sex and cannibalism are rare.\(^53\) The English and Scottish conception of the sabbat therefore failed to fully develop the image of a


\(^{53}\) Ibid., 151.
witch as cannibalistic, sexually promiscuous and ultimately anti-human, which helped prevent
the witch hunts from becoming as intense as they were on the Continent.

The Belief in the Witches’ Ability to Fly

The belief that witches were able to fly to the sabbat in order to worship Satan and
participate in a number of obscene rituals emerged on the Continent in the fifteenth century and
served to make witchcraft a larger and more dangerous operation, which facilitated the Great
European Witch Hunt. In the tenth century, two separate folk beliefs emerged that involved
women who were believed to travel by supernatural means at night, having been endowed with
supernatural powers by supernatural patrons. These two beliefs were starkly different in
character: Night Witches were believed to be evil beings who preyed on children, while Ladies
of the Night were believed to be benevolent beings and protectors. Despite the distinct
difference between beliefs regarding Night Witches and Ladies of the Night, John of Salisbury
combined these two myths, along with the myth of the sabbat, in the fifteenth century. It was
now believed that “the mistress of the night, summons gatherings and assemblies, which attend
various banquets. The figure receives all kinds of homage from her servants, some of whom are
handed over for punishment, while others are singled out for praise, according to their deserts.
Furthermore, they say that infants are exposed to the (mistress of the night); some of them being
dismembered and gluttonously devoured, while the mistress takes pity on others and has them

54 Cohn, Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt, 216.
55 Ibid., 210.
56 Ibid., 216.
put back in their cradles”\(^{57}\). In this way, beliefs in the ability of witches to fly were integrated into sabbat beliefs. In order to attend the sabbat, it was necessary for a witch to travel great distances in short periods of time without attracting the notice of those around them. Witches were now able to accomplish this feat through flight. Witches were believed to be capable of flying straight out of their bedroom windows, while the rest of the family continued to sleep peacefully, traveling to and from a sabbat held at any faraway location before anyone had the opportunity to notice their peculiar absence.\(^{58}\) This belief complemented that of the sabbat by explaining how witches were able to travel long distances to the sabbat in short periods of time. This belief, by extension, served to make witchcraft a larger operation, which was necessary for the large-scale nature of the Great European Witch Hunt.

The belief that witches were able to fly in order to travel great distances in short periods of time was not accepted in England or Scotland, which prevented witchcraft from being considered as large of an operation as it was on the Continent and therefore made English and Scottish witch hunts comparatively more tame. In England and Scotland, the ability of witches to fly does not figure prominently into witchcraft beliefs or trials.\(^{59}\) However, the belief that witches were able to fly was not completely absent in Britain, as can be observed in the writings of James VI of Scotland. James VI wrote in his witchcraft treatise, \textit{Daemonologie}, that Satan had the power to “transporte from one place to an other a solide bodie, as is commonlie and dailie seene in practise: But in this violent forme they cannot be carryed, but a shorte boundes, agreeing with the space that they may reteine their breath: for if it were longer, their breath could not remaine


\(^{58}\) Cohn, \textit{Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt}, 100.

\(^{59}\) Levack, \textit{The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe}, 201.
vnextinguished, their bodie being carryed in such a violent & forceable maner⁶⁰ – in other words, witches were able to fly through the air for as long as they could hold their breaths. However, this belief does not appear in witchcraft trials, and given the short period of time that witches would be able to fly, it would not account for flight to the sabbat. The belief in the ability of witches to fly therefore did not serve to create the conception of witchcraft as a larger operation in England and Scotland, which allowed the witchcraft trials in those countries to remain on a smaller scale than on the Continent.

Examples of English Witchcraft Trials

The first Chelmsford Trial began in 1566, when a poor, old woman by the name of Mother Waterhouse was accused of using witchcraft to kill her husband, neighbor, and neighbor’s animals. A poor neighbor, Elizabeth Francis, was interrogated, and she confessed to many crimes during the course of her questioning. As a child, Elizabeth claimed to have received a cat named Sathan from her grandmother. According to Elizabeth, Sathan did her bidding. Elizabeth wished to marry Andrew Byles, a man with some wealth, and Sathan promised her that she would. However, when Andrew did not want to marry Elizabeth, Elizabeth had Sathan kill Andrew with a touch. Elizabeth then asked Sathan for a different husband. Elizabeth married a less wealthy man and had a daughter with him. However, the marriage was unhappy, and Elizabeth was stirred to swear and curse. Elizabeth employed Sathan to kill her daughter and lame her husband. Elizabeth then gave Sathan to Mother Waterhouse, a poor neighbor. When Mother Waterhouse was questioned, she too confessed to many crimes. After Mother Waterhouse

received Sathan, she claimed to have turned him into a toad and ordered him to kill her husband, neighbor and neighbor’s animals.\textsuperscript{61} Mother Waterhouse’s poverty-stricken eighteen-year-old daughter, Joan, confirmed that her mother had kept such a toad and even confessed to having him do her bidding. When Joan was refused bread and cheese from a neighbor’s daughter, she sought the toad’s help. The toad promised to help her if she would surrender her soul to him, and she agreed. The toad then haunted the neighbor’s daughter, Agnes Brown, in the form of a dog with horns. Both Mother Waterhouse and Agnes Brown confirmed this story. The Devil’s mark was found on Mother Waterhouse, in the form of spots on her face from where she had pricked herself to offer her blood to the toad. The attorney offered to release Mother Waterhouse if she could make the spirit appear in court, but she refused.\textsuperscript{62} Mother Waterhouse was executed two days later; her own testimony was the primary evidence against her.\textsuperscript{63} In this Elizabeth English witchcraft trial, a few trends begin emerge. Both of the accused, Elizabeth and Mother Waterhouse, were very poor women. Mother Waterhouse was also very old, while Elizabeth harbored a bad reputation and was said to have given birth to an illegitimate child.\textsuperscript{64} Their crime of using spirits in the form of animals to harm their neighbors will also show itself to be a common accusation brought against witches in Elizabethan England.

Though Elizabeth Francis’s life was spared in the 1566 Chelmsford Trial, her reputation was not, as she was put on trial again thirteen years later, in the Chelmsford Trial of 1579. In this trial, Elizabeth was accused of cursing a woman and thereby causing her harm.\textsuperscript{65} As in the

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\textsuperscript{61} Notestein, \textit{A History of Witchcraft in England From 1558 to 1718}, 35.
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\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 36.
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\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 37.
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\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 40.
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\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 38.
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previous Chelmsford Trial, Elizabeth began to implicate other persons as fellow witches. One of these women was Elleine Smith, whose mother had been hanged as a witch. Elleine’s son testified against her, confessing that the poor woman had kept three spirits in animal form. Other women were also accused of keeping spirits in animal form and using them to bring harm to others. Unlike in the previous Chelmsford Trial, the witnesses did not all agree with one another’s statements, and the evidence was disorganized and inconclusive. Despite the contrary accounts and unsatisfactory evidence, three women, including Elizabeth Francis and Elleine Smith, were executed.66 In this Chelmsford Trial of 1579, we again see the trend of the accused being poor women with bad reputations, as both Elizabeth and Elleine were poor women who were said to have illegitimate children.67 These women were also accused of using spirits in the form of animals to cause harm to their neighbors, which was a common witchcraft accusation. A trend of continuation of suspicion also presents itself in this trial, as Elizabeth had already been accused of witchcraft, and Elleine’s mother had been found guilty of witchcraft. Their inability to rid themselves of their reputations encouraged suspicion and ultimately resulted in their execution.

The Warboys Trial occurred in Huntingdonshire in 1589 after a child of Sir Robert Throckmorton, the head of a prominent family in Huntingdonshire, had fallen ill. When a poor neighbor, Alice Samuel, visited the house, the ill child accused her of witchcraft. Shortly thereafter, three of the other Throckmorton children fell ill and also accused Alice of causing their illness through witchcraft.68 After a family member by the name of Lady Cromwell visited

67 Ibid., 40.
68 Ibid., 47.
the Throckmorton house and spoke with Alice, she had nightmares and then died more than one year later. Though the Throckmorton children and parents urged Alice to confess to using witchcraft to cause the illnesses, she refused. Alice was then forced to live at the Throckmorton house in order to be watched and experimented upon, and she was forced to go without food or sleep for extended periods of time. Finally, Alice confessed to giving her soul to the Devil and using spirits to harm the Throckmorton’s. However, she rescinded her confession the next day after she had gotten some sleep and had enjoyed the comfort of her own home. The constable then threatened to imprison Alice and her daughter, and she again confessed. She was then imprisoned along with her daughter, Agnes Samuel, and husband, John Samuel, who had since been implicated. In court, the Throckmorton children were able to pick Alice out from a crowd with their eyes closed, which indicated her guilt before the court. Agnes was forced to recite that she was a witch, and when she did so, the children’s fits stopped. John was forced to recite a similar confession to the same effect. These forms of proof, in addition to Alice’s confession, led to a guilty verdict, and all three of the Samuels were executed. In the Warboys Trial, we again see that the accused were poor, struggling against their rich accusers. The primary victim was also a woman, and though Alice’s husband was also accused and executed, this stemmed from his relationship to Alice. Additionally, the Samuels were accused of the familiar crime of using spirits to harm their neighbors, this time by causing them to have fits.

The Chelmsford Trial of 1566, the Chelmsford Trial of 1579 and the Warboys Trial of 1589 are all characteristic of witchcraft trials in Elizabethan England. Not only do they share trends in the nature of the trials, but they all fail to meet the preconditions necessary for the Great

69 Notestein, A History of Witchcraft in England From 1558 to 1718, 48.

70 Ibid., 49-50.
European Witch Hunt. The accused were not tortured in any of these trials, as torture was illegal in England. Because the inquisitorial judicial procedure had not been adopted in England, accusations came from individuals rather than the state. This can be seen observed through the focus of the accusations around maleficium, which was a concern of the people, rather than diabolism, which was a larger concern for the state. There are some elements of diabolism present in all three of these trials, however. In the Chelmsford Trial of 1566, both Elizabeth and Mother Waterhouse’s relationships with Sathan indicate a pact, and Joan explicitly admitted to promising her soul to Sathan. In the Chelmsford Trial of 1579, a pact with Satan is assumed through Elizabeth, Elleine and the other accused’s relationships with their respective spirits. In the 1589 Warboys Trial, Alice admitted to giving her soul to the Devil. Though diabolism in the form of a pact with Satan is present in these three trials, the maleficium of harming neighbors remains a greater concern for the courts. The sabbat does not present itself in any of these three trials, and there was therefore no mention of witches flying, which demonstrates the insignificance of these myths in English witch hunts.

Examples of Scottish Witchcraft Trials

In 1589, King James VI of Scotland married Princess Ann of Denmark, and when they sailed to Scotland, they met rough water, which was believed to be the work of Satan. Geillis Duncane was a poor maidservant in the household of David Seaton, the deputy bailiff of the town of Trenent. She was known for tending to the ill and helping them in ways that were described as miraculous. After a while, these miraculous acts of healing began to make David

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71 James VI, *Daemonologie*, 87.
suspicious. Geillis was tortured, and the Devil’s mark was found on her throat. She then confessed to being allured to witchcraft by the Devil.\textsuperscript{72} Geillis began to name many other witches, including Agnis Sampson, Agnes Tompson and Doctor Fian.\textsuperscript{73} Agnis Sampson was tortured and confessed to meeting with two hundred witches on Halloween in 1589. They met by the sea and sang and danced.\textsuperscript{74} Satan appeared in the form of a man and had the witches kiss his buttocks, and he received their oaths of service to him.\textsuperscript{75} Agnes Tompson confessed to using a black toad to make a potion to try to poison the King.\textsuperscript{76} She also confessed to christening a cat and binding it to a dead man. During the seaside sabbat the next night, the witches said their riddles and raised a tempest to kill the King.\textsuperscript{77} Dr. Fian was also tortured, and he confessed to being the leader of the witches.\textsuperscript{78} Geillis, Agnis, Agnes, Dr. Fian and at least a hundred other accused witches were executed in this 1590-1592 North Berwick Trial. In this witchcraft trial, some trends appear. Like in English trials, a majority of the accused witches are poor women. Suspicion first falls on Geillis due to the fact that she tends to the ill; those who work with the ill are oftentimes accused of possessing magical powers. Finally, the accused are said to have raised a storm at sea, which was a common accusation in Scottish port towns.

The Orkney Trial occurred in 1594. John Stewart, Master of Orkney, had plotted to kill his brother, the well-known Earl of Orkney. John’s servant and accomplice, Thomas Paplay, was

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{72} James VI, \textit{Daemonologie}, 88.
\item \textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 89.
\item \textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 92.
\item \textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 93.
\item \textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 95.
\item \textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 96.
\item \textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 98.
\end{itemize}
taken into custody and tortured for more information. Eventually, he named Alison Balfour, a poor woman and notorious witch, as an accomplice. Alison pled innocent to the attempted murder of the Earl, even under torture. The authorities then detained Alison’s elderly husband and two young children. Alison refused to confess, even while her husband and son were tortured in front of her very eyes. However, when she was forced to witness her young daughter being tortured, she finally gave in. She confessed to using a wax figure to try to kill the Earl of Orkney. Immediately before her execution, she retracted her confession, admitting that she only confessed to avoid the further pain of her family. She was executed nonetheless. In this Orkney Trial of 1594, we again see that the accused is a poor woman with a previous reputation as a witch. Additionally, accusations that a wax figure was used in order to inflict harm on an individual appear.

The Aberdeen Witchcraft Trials of 1597 largely revolved around the Wishart family. This family was composed of Janet Wishart, John Leis and their children: Thomas, Elspet, Janet and Violet. Janet Wishart was accused of a wide variety of acts of maleficium that dated back thirty years. She was said to have caused poverty, disease and death and to have controlled the weather in order to cause harm to others. Janet’s husband and children were also accused of witchcraft. Her son, Thomas, was said to have aided his mother in her deeds and even to have attended a sabbat with her. It was claimed that they had met Satan along with many other witches, who took various animal forms, at a meeting on a crossroads at midnight on All Hallow’s Eve in 1595. Janet’s daughters were also accused of various acts of maleficium. However, it was Janet and her son Thomas who were ultimately found guilty and executed, while John and his three daughters

were banished from Aberdeen. In the Aberdeen Witchcraft Trials of 1597, we once again see that the accused are poor. The primary suspect is an older woman, and her family is implicated by her reputation. Additionally, the suspects were accused of stereotypical maleficium, such as controlling the weather and causing death and disease.

The 1590-1592 North Berwick Trial, the Orkney Trial of 1594 and the Aberdeen Witchcraft Trials of 1597 are all characteristic of Scottish witchcraft trials under King James VI. Not only do they share trends in the nature of the trials, but they all fail to fully satisfy the preconditions necessary for the Great European Witch Hunt. In Scotland, the state had jurisdiction over crimes of witchcraft, and as a result, all three of these trials were held in secular courts. Additionally, the accused were tortured in all three of these trials. Due to the fact that the inquisitorial judicial procedure had been partially adopted in Scotland, accusations were able to come from the state, as can be seen in the North Berwick Trial. However, accusations oftentimes still came from individuals, as seen in the Orkney Trial of 1594 and the Aberdeen Witchcraft Trials of 1597. Like in England, these trials tended to focus around maleficium, but diabolism played a larger role in these Scottish trials. In the North Berwick Trial, the witches’ pact with Satan is described in great detail, as the witches were made to kiss Satan’s buttocks and swear their service to him. Elements of diabolism were also furthered in these trials by the inclusion of the sabbat. In the North Berwick Trial, the witches were said to have met at night and sang, danced and worshipped Satan at a sabbat. In the Aberdeen Witchcraft Trial of 1597, both Janet and her son were said to have attended a meeting along with many other witches, who took various animal forms, on a crossroads at midnight on All Hallow’s Eve in, where they met with

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Satan. However, the idea of witches flying to the sabbat was never completed, indicating the insignificance of this aspect of witchcraft beliefs in Scottish witch hunts.

Conclusion

The Great European Witch Hunt claimed the lives of an estimated 60,000 innocent people across Europe from the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries. This Great European Witch Hunt was not one coherent event, however; it was ultimately composed of a series of distinct, local witchcraft trials. The local witch hunts that comprised the Great European Witch Hunt were not all alike: the ideology that fueled witch hunts, process of prosecution and ultimately scale of witch hunting varied from location to location. One notable difference in patterns of witch hunting can be found when examining witchcraft trials in Elizabethan England, Jacobean Scotland and on the European Continent during the same time period. Despite the fact that both Queen Elizabeth I of England and James VI of Scotland believed that their lives were under a very real threat from witchcraft, witch hunting was less severe in England and Scotland during their respective reigns than it was on the Continent. In order to understand the reasoning behind these differences, we first must understand more about the implications of changing judicial procedures and the beliefs about witches and witchcraft that underlie the Great European Witch Hunt.

The Great European Witch Hunt would not have been possible if it were not for the fulfillment of a series of preconditions, which can be divided into two categories: changes in judicial process and changes in beliefs regarding witches and witchcraft. The judicial changes

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that were necessary to the occurrence of the Great European Witch Hunt include the adoption of
the inquisitorial judicial procedure, the use of torture and the movement of witchcraft trials to
secular and local courts. The changes to beliefs regarding witches and witchcraft that were
essential to the Great European Witch Hunt include a belief in maleficium facilitated by a pact
with Satan, a belief that witches met in large groups to perform anti-human rituals at the sabbat
and a belief in the witch’s ability to fly to these Satanic congregations. These preconditions to the
Great European Witch Hunt were generally fulfilled on the Continent but only partially satisfied
in England and Scotland, and more so in Scotland than in England. As a result, witch hunting
was not as severe in England and Scotland as it was on the European Continent, and it was even
more subdued in England than it was in Scotland. It is therefore the fulfillment of the
preconditions, which were necessary for the occurrence of the Great European Witch Hunt, that
account for differences in local witch hunts.


Secondary Bibliography


