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Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft, Volume 1, Number 1, Summer 2006, pp. 109-118  
(Review)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mrw.0.0005>



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# Witchcraft and Magic in Europe— and Beyond

BENGT ANKARLOO AND STUART CLARK, EDs., *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*.  
6 vols. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press / London: Athlone,  
1999–2002.

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There can be no doubt that historians needed a handbook of witchcraft and magic. It tells us a lot about the progress the historiography of magic and witchcraft has made in recent years that no older work can still be used as a handbook. Lynn Thorndike's monumental work is partly outdated and too limited in outlook.<sup>1</sup> If we look for a comprehensive account of magic, Keith Thomas's classic study still comes to mind. Thomas, however, concentrated almost exclusively on Britain, and as the book was first published more than thirty years ago, it has hardly anything to say about witch hunting that does not need revision.<sup>2</sup> Stephen Wilson's *Magical Universe* largely ignores the witch hunts, and the scrapbook fashion of his account seems old-fashioned and not suitable for the student audience.<sup>3</sup> Wolfgang Behringer does not want his short new account of witchcraft in premodern Europe and contemporary Africa and Asia to be a handbook.<sup>4</sup> Richard Golden's *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft* is certainly very helpful, but an encyclopedia cannot replace a handbook, or

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1. Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, 8 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1923–58).

2. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England*, 4th ed. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1991).

3. Stephen Wilson, *The Magical Universe: Everyday Ritual and Magic in Pre-Modern Europe* (New York: Hambledon and London, 2001).

4. Wolfgang Behringer, *Witches and Witch-Hunts: A Global History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

vice versa.<sup>5</sup> Thus, historians of witchcraft simply need Ankarloo's and Clark's *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*.

The series brings together eighteen articles by distinguished scholars in six volumes. Its concept entails a most daring approach to magic. This survey of magic in Europe starts outside of Europe in the Ancient Near East at the very beginning of what became the culture of the Christian West. Subsequent volumes describe ideas and practices about harmful magic chronologically. The last volume deals with the witch-beliefs of the twentieth century, the "new witches" and satanists. Many historians shiver at the thought of even suggesting a link between the victims of the early modern witch trials and the members of modern neopagan cults. To be sure, the founders of neopaganism based their teachings on serious misconceptions of the history of the witch hunts that could have been recognized as such even in their time. However, neopaganism has become one of the most significant expressions of the belief in witches in the twentieth century. Modern satanism is another very difficult issue. News about this adoption of demonology belongs largely to the dim-witted "infotainment" industries. Many academics seem to think that the less serious scholars say about it, the better. Should a history of magic provide information about the self-proclaimed satanists and the satanist scare in the media? Given the scope of the study, and the inclusion of Sumerian, Greek, and Roman magic, it is not only legitimate but conclusive and convincing to provide historical information on neopaganism and alleged modern demon worshippers, too. Both phenomena constitute probably the most visible expressions of magical thought in contemporary Europe and North America. Instead of ignoring them historians should accept them as legitimate objects of research and thus "secularize" them.

The very inclusive concept of magic in these volumes more than makes up for an obvious exclusion. The focus of the series is on the kind of magic that is usually labeled witchcraft—harmful magic done by humans. It goes almost without saying that this was a mere fraction—and arguably not even the most significant one—of magical culture. We do not hear that much about other forms of magic, about the myriads of spirits, the magical routines of everyday life, and the fringes of magic and science that were characteristic of premodern cultures. However, it would be foolish to denounce that restriction as a conceptual weakness of *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*. On the contrary, without that limitation the whole project would have been in jeopardy. Even six well-researched volumes would not be enough for a handbook

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5. Richard Golden, ed., *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft: The Western Tradition*, 4 vols. (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-Clío, 2006).

of all kinds of magic and magical beliefs in European history. The concept of the series is clear enough and flexible enough to make sense.

Each volume has a short introduction by the editors. With the regrettable exception of the all too sketchy and too generalizing introduction to the volume on *Biblical and Pagan Societies*, these texts provide good surveys and familiarize the reader with some of the main problems the articles of the respective volumes discuss.

The first volume of the series deals with magic in ancient pagan cultures and in Old Israel. Marie-Louise Thomsen discusses magic in ancient Mesopotamia. She integrates harmful magic in the wider context of religion and benign magic. Thomsen suggests that suspicions of witchcraft in Mesopotamia were directed against outsiders—hostile foreigners or the strangers within one’s own family, such as women who lived in the families of their husbands. Frederick Cryer describes the magical beliefs in Syria-Palestine and in the Old Testament. He refutes the naive notion that Old Israel’s strict monotheism knew of no magical elements other than those “imported” from neighboring pagans. According to Cryer, the monotheistic culture of the Old Testament was as familiar with magic as medieval Christian Europe.

Four authors discuss various aspects of magic in *Ancient Greece and Rome* in the second volume. Daniel Odgen presents and interprets archaeological finds—curse tablets and magical dolls (somewhat misleadingly labeled Voodoo dolls) as the material culture of magic. Georg Luck, the Nestor of the historiography of Greek and Roman magic, contributes an exhaustive study of magicians in classical literature. He sketches a very colorful and complex picture of literary witches and wizards, including purely invented characters as well as the literary reflections of historical persons. Some were godlike figures, others respected teachers and holy men, skillful poisoners, or even comical personages. Luck is not interested in the question whether his sources represent the reality of magic or simply their authors’ imaginings of magic. Richard Gordon’s thought-provoking essay deals with that question, if only to refute it. According to Gordon it is not satisfactory to look for magical practices as constituting the “reality” of magic, for it is characteristic of magic that it often exists more in the mind than in the world of facts and actions. Nevertheless, the concept of magic Gordon finds in a variety of sources, legal texts as well as purely fictional accounts, is predominately negative. The poets saw magic in the same terms as the respective legal authorities. Valerie Flint’s article concludes the volume. She deals with the demonization of magic by the early Christian church. The church’s response to magic was twofold. First, of course, it fought more explicit and dangerous forms of witchery. Second, the church tried to win over magicians. Their conversions

were all the more urgent as they harmed others and themselves by their contact with demons. In the context of the Jewish belief in demons Flint might have paid closer attention to the relationship between Satan and other demons, which was not as clear-cut as it might seem.<sup>6</sup>

Three authors contributed to the volume *The Middle Ages*. Karen Jolly gives a general overview. She points out three phases of change in the concept of magic: the period of Christianization, which Jolly considers as largely complete around 1100, the renaissance of the twelfth century, and the crisis of the late fourteenth century. Not surprisingly, Jolly describes Christianization as a process of marginalization and adoption of magic. The second paradigm shift was brought about by the rise of the towns, courtly culture, and the rediscovery of Aristotle in the high Middle Ages. New elites began to identify themselves with these new developments—burghers, courtiers, and scholastic theologians. Practitioners of magic became the significant “others” for them all. In the late fourteenth century, ideas about magic changed again, turning from a set of questionable practices to full-fledged witchcraft, practiced by a secret satanic organization. Jolly pays hardly any attention to the question why exactly this last paradigm shift occurred.<sup>7</sup> She goes on, instead, to describe common magical practices that seem to have been unaffected by the three paradigm shifts.

The other two articles in the volume on the Middle Ages elaborate thoroughly on a number of points Jolly raised. Using sagas and the mythology of the *Eddas* as sources Catharina Raudevere examines ideas about *trolldómnr* in high medieval Scandinavia. Raudevere presents this magic as an integral part of rural life, a set of rituals rather than ideas or concepts, mostly used to fight off disease and starvation and to predict the future. The few source materials that give insight into the culture of the Anglo-Saxons and Continental Germanic tribes suggest that they shared this concept of magic. Raudevere ends her discussion of Norse magic with an outline of magic in law and trials against magicians. Persons found guilty of using harmful *trolldómnr* were burned, drowned, or stoned to death. However, if it was obvious that the magician had acted on behalf of a person of higher standing, the practitioner of *trolldómnr* was not even brought to court. His or her “principal” was accused instead. The purely instrumental character of magic in a society that had not yet fully accepted Christianity is obvious here. After providing the back-

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6. Cf. Meinhard Limbeck, “Satan und das Böse im Neuen Testament,” in Herbert Haag, *Teufelsglaube*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Katzmann, 1974), 271–388, esp. 384–87.

7. Johannes Dillinger, “Terrorists and Witches: Popular Ideas of Evil in the Early Modern Period,” *History of European Ideas* 30 (2004): 167–82.

ground of systems of magical beliefs in Greece and Rome in the pervious volume, it might have been very interesting for the series to look not only at *trolldómur* in medieval Scandinavian, but at popular concepts of magic in medieval Mediterranean countries too.

In the third article on the Middle Ages, Edward Peters discusses the attitude of church and state toward magic in Latin Europe. After looking again briefly at the church of antiquity, Peters deals with magic in Germanic and early canon law. The reformist clerics of the eighth and ninth centuries together with the Carolingians put strong emphasis on the struggle against magic and superstition. The Canon Episcopi was an integral part of that first wave of ecclesiastical and secular measures against magical beliefs and practices. The twelfth century brought new ideas about the powers of nature, and in connection with that a more sophisticated demonology. The experience of the mass persecution of heretics and the rise of inquisitions helped to set the stage for the first witch trials. After briefly reviewing the well-known trials against the Knights Templar and various courtiers, and probably too short a glance at condemnations of magic from Jean Gerson and the faculty of the Sorbonne, Peters alters the scene. In order to fully understand the rise of the witch hunts, he turns his attention to the western Alpine region of the early fifteenth century. Here, in one of most lively and “progressive” regions of Europe, the image of the witch emerged out of regional or even local contingencies. Peters points out the intermingling of trials and the emergence of new demonological literature. In light of the findings of the important research group working in Lausanne, Peters might have put a greater emphasis on the paradigmatic importance of the first trials themselves.<sup>8</sup> Broedel’s recent study on the *Malleus maleficarum*—which Peters could not yet know—certainly points in that direction, too.<sup>9</sup>

Surprisingly, the volume on *The Period of the Witch Trials* is the second shortest of the series. As numerous good monographs on the persecutions in a variety of European regions and states have been published in recent years, William Monter and Bengt Ankarloo, two of the pioneers of witchcraft research, are in the position to present a new panorama of witch hunts that is much more complete, clearer, and more colourful than that sketched in the

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8. Martine Ostorero, Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, and Kathrin Utz Tremp, eds., *L’imaginaire du Sabbat: Édition Critique des Textes les Plus Anciens, 1430 c.–1440 c.* (Lausanne: Université de Lausanne, Section d’histoire, Faculté des lettres, 1999).

9. Hans Peter Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft: Theology and Popular Belief* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

“classical” collection of essays *Häxornas Europa*.<sup>10</sup> Monter provides a short survey of the witch hunts in Continental Europe. His focus on the Holy Roman Empire is well justified: large-scale witch hunts did indeed concentrate in several German principalities. Referring to parts of the extensive research on witch trials that has been done in German-speaking Europe during the last twenty years, Monter points out that severe witch hunts were limited to territories in which administration was badly organized and government control was loose. Within such deficient systems special administrations could rise that quickly accumulated power and worked without any effective outside control placed over them. Monter concentrates on these administrations. He underplays the role of the common people; in various territories peasants and townspeople organized witch hunts themselves with hardly any support from the state administration and sometimes even against the specific orders of the respective prince. Well-organized states with effective centralized control remained largely free of intensive witch hunts. This holds true not only for German principalities; France, with the Parlement de Paris as a powerful appellate court, also remained largely free of intensive witch hunts. Unfortunately, the article has little information on popular witch beliefs.

Bengt Ankarloo discusses the persecution of witches in the Netherlands, the Baltic, Scandinavia, and Britain. Here again, the importance of legal and administrative structures is obvious. England experienced its most severe witch hunt during the Civil War when in some regions the system of criminal justice broke down. In Scotland, the persecutions were conducted by special commissions that worked outside of the ordinary legal system. The well-known Swedish trials of the 1660s must be regarded as the work of royal commissions established to meet the demands of a nervous and potentially dangerous peasantry. In contrast to that, the Netherlands managed to subject criminal courts constantly to the close and systematic control of well-trained jurists. In the third essay in the volume, Stuart Clark describes magic as a part of early modern culture. He has a short but informative chapter on folk magic and popular concepts of witchcraft. Following the general outlines of his monograph on demons in early modern intellectual history, Clark provides clear and well-documented insight into the meaning of demonology and *magia naturalis* in scientific and political debates.<sup>11</sup>

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10. Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen, eds., *Häxornas Europa 1400–1700: Historiska och Antropologiska Studier—Early Modern European Witchcraft: Centres and Peripheries* (Lund: Institutet för Rätthistorisk Forskning, 1987; Oxford: Clarendon, 1990).

11. Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

The volume on *The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* discusses the transformations of magic. In his cautiously argued article on the decline of the witch hunts, Brian Levack takes nothing for granted. He examines closely various factors that all contributed to the end of the persecutions. The first signs of tolerance and secularization might have helped to dampen the princes' zeal concerning witch hunts. The beginning of scepticism concerning the power of the devil in the visible world, and the significant economic and social improvements after the end of the "Little Ice Age" undoubtedly played their role in the cessation of the persecutions. Levack convincingly argues, however, that the growth and diversification of legal administrations was the decisive factor that put a stop to the witch hunts. This conclusion is entirely in keeping with the results of research Monter and Ankarloo summarized in their respective articles. Levack's argument implies that the end of the witch hunts was by no means the end of the belief in witches. Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra amply demonstrates that the witches did not disappear from popular culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. No longer accepted in court, witchcraft lingered on in the private sphere. It was used to explain personal rather than collective misfortune. No folklorist will be surprised to learn that folk magic and countermagic against witches continued to flourish. The gender patterns of magic known from the early modern period also do not seem to have changed.

Roy Porter examines the active struggle of cultural elites against "superstition" during the Enlightenment. Of course, the victory of the Enlightenment was at best doubtful. Neither the aggressive campaigns of the adherents of Voltaire—Porter concentrates on the French context—nor the new interest in science, but rather the marginalization of rural culture and the rise of urban capitalism helped to weaken the traditional concepts and practices of magic. Thus, old European magic declined together with and as a part of preindustrial culture. New magic emerged; magical practices appeared in Bourgeois society that experimented with fashionable quackeries and witnessed the rise of spiritualism as a new combination of religion and science. Porter deals too briefly with the spiritualists. He has only half a page to spare for the Freemasons. Schindler's ground-breaking discussion of the magical elements of Freemasonry is not even listed in the bibliography.<sup>12</sup> "Count" Cagliostro, arguably the most prominent self-styled magician of the eighteenth century,

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12. Norbert Schindler, "Freimauerkultur im 18. Jahrhundert: Zur sozialen Funktion des Geheimnisses in der entstehenden bürgerlichen Gesellschaft," in *Klassen und Kultur: Sozialanthropologische Perspektiven in der Geschichtsschreibung*, ed. Robert M. Berdahl (Frankfurt: Syndikat, 1982), 205–62.



is mentioned only fleetingly. Even in the year of the Mozart anniversary, nobody will argue that we need speculations about the meaning of “The Magic Flute” in a handbook on the history of magic; however, the magic or at least the rumors of magic that belong to the history of Freemasonry in the eighteenth century would have merited more attention.

In the volume on *The Twentieth Century*, Ronald Hutton gives a comprehensive account of the history of Wicca. He presents Wicca as having a complicated cultural texture. It encompasses various elements of ritual magic practiced by Freemasons and Theosophists as well as learned nineteenth-century ideas about the nature and meaning of folk traditions that were always more in the heads of the folklorists than in the minds of rural folk. With speculations by Michelet and the brothers Grimm about the victims of the witch trials as cryptopagans, the stage was set for Margaret Murray and Gerald Gardner. Hutton follows the development of neopaganism through Europe and North America until the 1990s when “enlightened” Wiccans began to distance themselves from Murray’s ideas about the witch hunts. Jean La Fontaine takes the goat by the horns; the title of her article “Satanism and Satanic Mythology” makes clear that she does not take the sensational news about satanic ritual abuse in recent years seriously. La Fontaine describes the emergence of various satanist groups. Self-proclaimed satanists appear to be a tiny minority even within the small fraction of society that participates in occult sects. It is even questionable whether satanists should be addressed as a sect. They might flirt with notions of devil worship along the lines described by demonology. However, they tend to regard Satan not so much as a person, still less as a deity, but as a symbol for self-fulfilment. The societal relevance of the satanists does not lay in their alleged leaning toward right wing extremism, but rather in the use several news agencies and authors made of them. La Fontaine describes a satanic abuse mythology, a set of beliefs about a conspiracy of demon worshippers who engage in criminal acts including the sexual abuse of minors. Supported by child abuse hysteria and uneducated Christian fundamentalism, this myth continues to spread through modern Western societies even though there is virtually no material evidence for satanist crimes. La Fontaine traces the allegations of secret groups of magicians who engage in illicit sex back to antiquity. Here, indeed, we seem to have not continuity but a revival of an old set of ideas. Willem de Blécourt concludes the volume with a study of the belief in harmful magic and the fight against it in twentieth-century Europe. After reviewing collections of folk tales and the secondary literature that is often all too parochial in outlook, de Blécourt describes liminality as the core feature of modern witchcraft. The witch herself is a marginal figure. She is perceived as a real threat mostly in

situations of crisis. People most often do not simply believe in witches in all circumstances; only when they are confronted with the limits of their abilities do they convince themselves or become convinced by others that their respective misfortune must have been caused by magic.

Even though *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe* is certainly a most valuable contribution to the history of witchcraft, it has, as a whole, some obvious shortcomings. It would have paid to make the books slightly more expensive by adding more illustrations, graphs, and maps. Even though the authors tried to keep abreast with the tremendous output of witchcraft research, some important new monographs and collections of essays have been overlooked. The “Europe” under discussion is still largely Latin Europe, that is, Catholic and Protestant Europe. Orthodox Europe plays hardly any role. Apparently, none of the authors thought it worth their while to deal at any length with Carlo Ginzburg. A series of books that deals with witchcraft since the earliest days of civilization would seem to be the ideal place to discuss Ginzburg’s ideas about an age-old tradition of night-flight.<sup>13</sup> His or other provocative and controversial standpoints in witchcraft research receive no attention. A handbook should give a better insight into the history and the different concepts of the respective field of study.<sup>14</sup> The texts in the six volumes do not have the same structure. Several authors summarize their explanations in “Conclusion” chapters, others do not. Some authors provide the reader with helpful bibliographical essays in addition to the general bibliography, others do not. A similar problem affects the structure of the volumes themselves. A clear pattern for the composition of the individual volumes is lacking. Every volume has a structure that is entirely its own. Thus, the selection of the texts for the series appears to be somewhat additive.

Is it legitimate to draw conclusions from this huge mass of information? Should we, after reading through these volumes, try to say something about maleficent magic in European culture in general? If the editors thought so, they left this task to the readers; as there is no general introduction so there is no concluding summary of any kind. Neither handbooks nor reviews are supposed to provide revolutionary new insights. In the introductions, there are tantalizing allusions to apparent continuities in magical thought and prac-

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13. Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches’ Sabbath*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

14. Cf. the new study by Wolfgang Behringer, “Geschichte der Hexenfor- schung,” in *Wider alle Hexerei und Teufelswerk: Die Europäische Hexenverfolgung und ihre Auswirkung auf Südwestdeutschland*, ed. Sönke Lorenz and Jürgen Michael Schmidt (Ostfildern: Thorbecke, 2004), 485–668.

tice. In the introduction of the volume on the twentieth century, however, the reader is somewhat disappointed to see the apparent continuities in this period explained away as existing mostly in the eye of the beholder. Nevertheless, one might argue that some ideas about magic and some “tools” used by magicians are so basic and so close to the core of European culture that change was not necessary. Maybe it was not even feasible. Magical practices could hardly change anymore because everybody knew they were ancient.

*Witchcraft and Magic in Europe* is so monumental a work that it is largely immune to criticism. The series is a good summary of what we already know and a good starting point for further research. The student audience will welcome the informative surveys. The editors as well as all the authors have made a lasting contribution to the historiography of European magic.