

# Recent Developments in the Study of The Great European Witch Hunt

by Jenny Gibbons

Since the late 1970's, a quiet revolution has taken place in the study of historical witchcraft and the Great European Witch Hunt. The revolution wasn't quite as dramatic as the development of radio-carbon dating, but many theories which reigned supreme thirty years ago have vanished, swept away by a flood of new data. Unfortunately, little of the new information has made it into popular history. Many articles in Pagan magazines contain almost no accurate information about the "Burning Times", primarily because we rely so heavily on out-dated research.

## Beyond the National Enquirer

What was this revolution? Starting in the mid-1970's, historians stopped relying on witch-hunting propaganda and began to base their theories on thorough, systematic studies of all the witch trials in a particular area.

Ever since the Great Hunt itself, we've relied on witch hunters' propaganda: witch hunting manuals, sermons against witchcraft, and lurid pamphlets on the more sensational trials. Everyone knew that this evidence was lousy. It's sort of like trying to study Satanism in America using only the Moral Majority Newsletter and the National Enquirer. The few trials cited were the larger, more infamous ones. And historians frequently used literary accounts of those cases, not the trials themselves. That's comparable to citing a television docu-drama ("Based on a true story!") instead of actual court proceedings.

Better evidence did exist. Courts that tried witches kept records -- trial verdicts, lists of confiscated goods, questions asked during interrogations, and the answers witches gave. This evidence was written by people who knew what actually happened. Witch hunters often based their books on rumor and hearsay; few had access to reliable information. Courts had less reason to lie since, for the most part, they were trying to keep track of what was going on: how many witches they killed, how much money they gained or lost, etc. Witch hunters wrote to convince people that witchcraft was a grievous threat to the world. The more witches there were, the bigger the "threat" was. So they often exaggerated the number of deaths and spread wild estimates about how many witches existed. Also, trial records addressed the full range of trials, not just the most lurid and sensational ones.

But trial data had one daunting draw-back: there was too much of it. Witch trials were scattered amongst literally millions of other trials from this period. For most historians, it was too much work to wade through this mass of data. The one exception was C. L'Estrange Ewen. In 1929 he published the first systematic study of a country's trial records: *Witch Hunting and Witch Trials*. Focused on England, his work offered vivid evidence of how much data literature missed. In Essex County, for instance, Ewen found thirty times as many trials as any previous researcher. Scholars were basing their theories on only

3% of the available evidence. And that 3% was vastly different from the other 97%.

In the 1970's other researchers followed in Ewen's footsteps, so in the last twenty-five years, the quantity and quality of available evidence has dramatically improved. Now we can look at all the trials from an area and see what the "normal" trial was really like. Court documents frequently contain detailed information on the gender, social status, and occupation of the accused. Today, for the first time, we have a good idea of the dimensions of the Great Hunt: where the trials occurred, who was tried in them, who did the killing, and how many people lost their lives.

#### 400 In One Day: An Influential Forgery

Another, smaller breakthrough also profoundly altered our view of the early history of the Great Hunt. In 1972, two scholars independently discovered that a famous series of medieval witch trials never happened.

The forgery was Etienne Leon de Lamothe-Langon's *Histoire de l'Inquisition en France*, written in 1829. Lamothe-Langon described enormous witch trials which supposedly took place in southern France in the early 14th century. Run by the Inquisition of Toulouse and Carcassonne, these trials killed hundreds upon hundreds of people. The most famous was a craze where 400 women died in one day. No other French historian had noticed these trials.

In the early 20th century, the prominent historian Jacob Hansen included large sections of Lamothe-Langon's work in his compendium on medieval witchcraft. Later historians cited Hansen's cites, apparently without closely examining Lamothe-Langon's credentials. Non-academic writers cited the writers who cited Hansen, and thus Lamothe-Langon's dramatic French trials became a standard part of the popular view of the Great Hunt.

However, as more research was done, Lamothe-Langon's trials began to look odd to historians. No sources mentioned them, and they were completely different from all other 14th century trials. There were no other mass trials of this nature until 1428, no panics like this until the 16th century. Furthermore, the demonology in the trials was quite elaborate, with sabbats and pacts and enormous black masses. It was far more complex than the demonology of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486). Why would the Inquisition think up this elaborate demonology, and then apparently forget it for two hundred years?

Questions like these led Norman Cohn (*Europe's Inner Demons* and "Three Forgeries: Myths and Hoaxes of European Demonology II" in *Encounter* 44 (1975)) and Richard Kieckhefer (*European Witch Trials*) to investigate Lamothe-Langon's background. What they found was reasonably conclusive evidence that the great trials of the *Histoire* had never occurred.

First, Lamothe-Langon was a hack writer and known forger, not a historian. Early in his career he specialized in historical fiction, but he soon turned to more profitable horror novels, like *The Head of Death*, *The Monastery of the Black Friars*, and *The Vampire* (or, *The Virgin of Hungary*). Then, in 1829, he published the *Histoire*, supposedly a work of non-fiction. After its success Lamothe-Langon went on to write a series of "autobiographies" of various French notables, such as Cardinal Richeleau, Louis

## XVIII, and the Comtesse du Barry.

Second, none of Lamothe-Langon's sources could be found, and there was strong reason to suspect they never existed. Lamothe-Langon claimed he was using unpublished Inquisitorial records given to him by Bishop Hyacinthe Sermet -- Cohn found a letter from Sermet stating that there were no unpublished records. Lamothe-Langon had no training in paleography, the skill needed to translate the script and copious abbreviations used in medieval documents, and he was not posted in Toulouse long enough to do any serious research in its archives.

Third, under close examination a number of flaws appeared in his stories. He cited records written by seneschal Pierre de Voisins in 1275, but Voisins ceased being seneschal in 1254 and died not long after. The inquisitor who ran many of these trials was Pierre Guidonis (nephew of Bernard Gui from *The Name of the Rose*). But Guidonis wasn't an inquisitor at the time when the trials were held. Cohn and Kieckhefer published their findings in 1972. Since, then academics have avoided this forged material. Unfortunately by this point, Lamothe-Langon's lurid trials had entered into the mythology of witchcraft. While nobody cites Lamothe-Langon directly anymore, his fictions show up everywhere, including both Z Budapest's *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries* and Raven Grimassi's *The Wiccan Mysteries*.

There's no simple way to weed out all of Lamothe-Langon's disinformation, but a few guidelines will help:

a) Use scholarly texts written after 1975. b) Beware of any trial set in Toulouse or Carcassonne. While these cities did have real cases, only the forged ones get cited regularly. c) Ignore any trial involving Anne-Marie de Georgel or Catherine Delort; they're forgeries. d) Ignore any trial that killed "400 women in one day." This never happened. e) Avoid Jules Michelet's *Satanism and Witchcraft*. Although he wrote a poetic and dramatic book, Michelet never found much historical evidence to support his theory that witchcraft was an anti-Catholic protest religion. What little bit there was came from the Lamothe-Langon forgeries. So when they were debunked, the last props for his book collapsed. f) The appendix of Richard Kieckhefer's *European Witch Trials* contains a list of all known trials that occurred between 1300 and 1500.

## The New Geography of Witch Hunting

The pattern revealed by trial records bears little resemblance to the picture literature painted. Every aspect of the Great Hunt, from chronology to death toll, has changed. And if your knowledge of the "Burning Times" is based on popular or Pagan literature, nearly everything you know may be wrong.

a) Chronology. Popular history places the witchcraft persecutions in the Middle Ages (5th-14th centuries). 19th century historians considered the Great Hunt an outburst of superstitious hysteria, fostered and spread by the Catholic Church. "Naturally", therefore, the persecution would be worst when the Church's power was the greatest: in the Middle Ages, before the Reformation split "the" Church into warring Catholic and Protestant sects. Certainly there were trials in the early modern period (15th-18th centuries), but they must have been a pale shadow of the horrors that came before.

Modern research has debunked this theory quite conclusively. Although many stereotypes about witches pre-date Christianity, the lethal crazes of the Great Hunt were actually the child of the "Age of Reason."

Lamothe-Langon's forged trials were one of the last stumbling blocks that kept the theory of medieval witch hunting alive, and once these trials are removed, the development of witchcraft stereotypes becomes much clearer. All pre-modern European societies believed in magick. As far as we can tell, all passed laws prohibiting magickal crimes. Pagan Roman law and the earliest Germanic and Celtic law codes all contain edicts that punish people who cast baneful spells. This is only common sense: a society that believes in the power of magick will punish people who abuse that power.

Many of the stereotypes about witches have been with us from pre-Christian times. From the Mediterranean to Ireland, witches were said to fly about at night, drinking blood, killing babies, and devouring human corpses. We know this because many early Christian missionaries encouraged newly converted kingdoms to pass laws protecting men and women from charges of witchcraft -- charges, they said, that were impossible and un-Christian. For example, the 5th century Synod of St. Patrick ruled that "A Christian who believes that there is a vampire in the world, that is to say, a witch, is to be anathematized; whoever lays that reputation upon a living being shall not be received into the Church until he revokes with his own voice the crime that he has committed." A capitulary from Saxony (775-790 CE) blamed these stereotypes on pagan belief systems: "If anyone, deceived by the Devil, believes after the manner of the Pagans that any man or woman is a witch and eats men, and if on this account he burns [the alleged witch]... he shall be punished by capital sentence."

In the Middle Ages, the laws on magick remained virtually unchanged. Harmful magick was punished, and the lethal trials we know of tended to occur when a noble felt that he or she had been bewitched. The Church also forbade magick and assigned relatively mild penalties to convicted witches. For instance, the Confessional of Egbert (England, 950-1000 CE) said that "If a woman works witchcraft and enchantment and [uses] magical philters, she shall fast [on bread and water] for twelve months.... If she kills anyone by her philters, she shall fast for seven years."

Traditional attitudes towards witchcraft began to change in the 14th century, at the very end of the Middle Ages. As Carlo Ginzburg noted (*Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbat*), early 14th century central Europe was seized by a series of rumor-panics. Some malign conspiracy (Jews and lepers, Moslems, or Jews and witches) was attempting to destroy the Christian kingdoms through magick and poison. After the terrible devastation caused by the Black Death (1347-1349) these rumors increased in intensity and focused primarily on witches and "plague-spreaders".

Witchcraft cases increased slowly but steadily from the 14th-15th century. The first mass trials appeared in the 15th century. At the beginning of the 16th century, as the first shock-waves from the Reformation hit, the number of witch trials actually dropped. Then, around 1550, the persecution skyrocketed. What we think of as "the Burning Times" -- the crazes, panics, and mass hysteria -- largely occurred in one century, from 1550-1650. In the 17th century, the Great Hunt passed nearly as suddenly as it had arisen. Trials dropped sharply after 1650 and disappeared completely by the end of the 18th century.

b) Geography Before Lamothe-Langon's forgeries were discovered, the earliest great hunts appeared to come from southern France. in an area once the home of the Cathar heresy. This led some historians to suggest a link between Catharism and witchcraft, that witches were the remnants of an old dualist faith. After you delete the forged trials, the center of the early cases shifts to "Switzerland" and northern Italy,

away from Cathar lands.

When all trials are plotted on a map, other surprising patterns emerge. First, the trials were intensely sporadic. The rate of witch hunting varied dramatically throughout Europe, ranging from a high of 26,000 deaths in Germany to a low of 4 in Ireland. Robin Briggs' *Witches and Neighbors* can give you a good feel for how erratic the trials were. It contains three maps showing the distribution of trials throughout Europe, throughout Germany, and throughout the French province of Lorraine, which Briggs studied in depth. They reveal that some of the most enormous persecutions (like the panics of Wurzburg, Germany) occurred next to areas that had virtually no trials whatsoever.

Second, the trials were concentrated in central Europe, in Germany, Switzerland, and eastern France. The further you got away from that area, the lower the persecution generally got.

Third, the height of the persecution occurred during the Reformation, when the formerly unified Christian Church shattered into Catholic and Protestant sects. In countries like Italy and Spain, where the Catholic Church and its Inquisition reigned virtually unquestioned, witch hunting was uncommon. The worst panics took place in areas like Switzerland and Germany, where rival Christian sects fought to impose their religious views on each other.

Fourth, panics clustered around borders. France's major crazes occurred on its Spanish and eastern fronts. Italy's worst persecution was in the northern regions. Spain's one craze centered on the Basque lands straddling the French/Spanish border.

Fifth, although it has become commonplace to think of the outbreaks of witch hunting as malevolent pogroms imposed by evil elites, in reality the worst horrors occurred where central authority had broken down. Germany and Switzerland were patchwork quilts, loose confederacies stitched together from dozens of independent political units. England, which had a strong government, had little witch hunting. The country's one and only craze took place during the English Civil War, when the government's power collapsed. A strong, unified national church (as in Spain and Italy) also tended to keep deaths to a minimum. Strong governments didn't always slow witch hunting, as King James of Scotland proved. But the worst panics definitely hit where both Church and State were weak.

c) Christianity's Role in the Persecution For years, the responsibility for the Great Hunt has been dumped on the Catholic Church's door-step. 19th century historians ascribed the persecution to religious hysteria. And when Margaret Murray proposed that witches were members of a Pagan sect, popular writers trumpeted that the Great Hunt was not a mere panic, but rather a deliberate attempt to exterminate Christianity's rival religion.

Today, we know that there is absolutely no evidence to support this theory. When the Church was at the height of its power (11th-14th centuries) very few witches died. Persecutions did not reach epidemic levels until after the Reformation, when the Catholic Church had lost its position as Europe's indisputable moral authority. Moreover most of the killing was done by secular courts. Church courts tried many witches but they usually imposed non-lethal penalties. A witch might be excommunicated, given penance, or imprisoned, but she was rarely killed. The Inquisition almost invariably pardoned any

witch who confessed and repented.

Consider the case in York, England, as described by Keith Thomas (*Religion and the Decline of Magic*). At the height of the Great Hunt (1567-1640) one half of all witchcraft cases brought before church courts were dismissed for lack of evidence. No torture was used, and the accused could clear himself by providing four to eight "compurgators", people who were willing to swear that he wasn't a witch. Only 21% of the cases ended with convictions, and the Church did not impose any kind of corporal or capital punishment.

The vast majority of witches were condemned by secular courts. Ironically, the worst courts were local courts. Some authors, like Anne Llewellyn Barstow (*Witchcraze*), blame the death toll on the decline of the "community-based" medieval court, and the rise of the centralized "national" court. Nothing could be further from the truth. "Community-based" courts were often virtual slaughterhouses, killing 90% of all accused witches. National courts condemned only about 30% of the accused.

Why were the execution rates so vastly different? Civil courts tended to handle "black" witchcraft cases, trials involving charges of magickal murder, arson, and other violent crimes. Church courts tried more "white" witchcraft: cases of magickal healing, divination, and protective magick. Trial evidence shows that courts always treated healing more leniently than cursing. Additionally, secular and religious courts served two different purposes. Civil courts "protected" society by punishing and killing convicted criminals. In theory, the Church's court system was designed to "save" the criminal -- to make him or her a good Christian once more. Only unrepentant sinners were to be executed. The differences between local and national courts are also easy to explain. Witchcraft cases were usually surrounded by general fear and public protests. "Community-based" courts drew their officials from the community, the group of people affected by this panic. National courts had more distance from the hysteria. Moreover national courts tended to have professional, trained staff -- men who were less likely to discard important legal safeguards in their haste to see "justice" done.

d) The Inquisition But what of the Inquisition? For many, the "Inquisition" and the "Burning Times" are virtually synonymous. The myth of the witch-hunting inquisition was built on several assumptions and mistakes, all of which have been overturned in the last twenty-five years. First, the myth was the logical extension of 19th century history, which blamed the persecutions on the Catholic Church. If the Church attacked witches, surely the Inquisition would be the hammer she wielded.

Second, a common translation error muddied the waters. Many records simply said that a witch was tried "by inquisition". Some writers assumed that this meant "the" Inquisition. And in some cases it did. But an "inquisition" was also the name of a type of trial used by almost all courts in Europe at the time. Later, when historians examined the records in greater detail, they found that the majority did not involve the Inquisition, merely an inquisition. Today most historians are careful about this, but older and more popular texts (such as Rossell Hope Robbins' *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology*) still have the Inquisition killing witches in times and places where it did not even exist.

Third, the only witch-hunting manual most people have seen was written by an inquisitor. In the 1970's, when feminist and Neo-Pagan authors turned their attention to the witch trials, the *Malleus Maleficarum*

(*Hammer of Witches*) was the only manual readily available in translation. Authors naively assumed that the book painted an accurate picture of how the Inquisition tried witches. Heinrich Kramer, the text's demented author, was held up as a typical inquisitor. His rather stunning sexual preoccupations were presented as the Church's "official" position on witchcraft. Actually the Inquisition immediately rejected the legal procedures Kramer recommended and censured the inquisitor himself just a few years after the *Malleus* was published. Secular courts, not inquisitorial ones, resorted to the *Malleus*.

As more research was done and historians became more sensitive to the "an inquisition/the Inquisition" error, the inquisitorial witch-hunter began to look like a rare bird. Lamothe-Langon's trials were the last great piece of "evidence", and when they fell, scholars re-examined the Inquisition's role in the Burning Times. What they found was quite startling. In 1258 Pope Alexander IV explicitly refused to allow the Inquisition from investigating charges of witchcraft: "The Inquisitors, deputed to investigate heresy, must not intrude into investigations of divination or sorcery without knowledge of manifest heresy involved." The gloss on this passage explained what "manifest heresy" meant: "praying at the altars of idols, to offer sacrifices, to consult demons, to elicit responses from them... or if [the witches] associate themselves publicly with heretics." In other words, in the 13th century the Church did not consider witches heretics or members of a rival religion.

It wasn't until 1326, almost 100 years later, that the Church reversed its position and allowed the Inquisition to investigate witchcraft. But the only significant contribution that was made was in the development of "demonology", the theory of the diabolic origin of witchcraft. As John Tedeschi demonstrates in his essay "Inquisitorial Law and the Witch" (in Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen's *Early Modern European Witchcraft*) the Inquisition still played a very small role in the persecution. From 1326-1500, few deaths occurred. Richard Kieckhefer (*European Witch Trials*) found 702 definite executions in all of Europe from 1300-1500; of these, only 137 came from inquisitorial or church courts. By the time that trials were common (early 16th century) the Inquisition focused on the proto-Protestants. When the trials peaked in the 16th and 17th century, the Inquisition was only operating in two countries: Spain and Italy, and both had extremely low death tolls.

In fact, in Spain the Inquisition worked diligently to keep witch trials to a minimum. Around 1609, a French witch-craze triggered a panic in the Basque regions of Spain. Gustav Henningsen (*The Witches' Advocate*) documented the Inquisition's work in brilliant detail. Although several inquisitors believed the charges, one skeptic convinced La Suprema (the ruling body of the Spanish Inquisition) that this was groundless hysteria. La Suprema responded by issuing an "Edict of Silence" forbidding all discussion of witchcraft. For, as the skeptical inquisitor noted, "There were neither witches nor bewitched until they were talked and written about."

The Edict worked, quickly dissipating the panic and accusations. And until the end of the Great Hunt, the Spanish Inquisition insisted that it alone had the right to condemn witches -- which it refused to do. Another craze broke out in Vizcaya, in 1616. When the Inquisition re-issued the Edict of Silence, the secular authorities went over their head and petitioned the king for the right to try witches themselves. The king granted the request, and 289 people were quickly sentenced. Fortunately the Inquisition managed to re-assert its monopoly on trials and dismissed all the charges. The "witches" of Cataluna were not so lucky. Secular authorities managed to execute 300 people before the Inquisition could stop

the trials.

e) The Witches Court records showed that there was no such thing as an "average" witch: there was no characteristic that the majority of witches shared, in all times and places. Not gender. Not wealth. Not religion. Nothing. The only thing that united them was the fact that they were accused of witchcraft. The diversity of witches is one of the strongest arguments against the theory that the Great Hunt was a deliberate pogrom aimed at a specific group of people. If that was true, then most witches would have something in common.

We can isolate certain factors that increased a person's odds of being accused. Most witches were women. Many were poor or elderly; many seem to be unmarried. Most were alienated from their neighbors, or seen as "different" and disliked. But there is no evidence that one group was targeted. Traditional magick users might have a slightly higher chance of being accused of witchcraft, but the vast majority of known "white" witches were never charged.

Before trial evidence was available, there were two major theories on who the witches were. Margaret Murray (*The Witch Cult in Western Europe* and *The God of the Witches*) proposed that witches were members of a Pagan sect that worshipped the Horned God. Murray's research was exceptionally poor, and occasionally skated into out-right textual manipulation. She restricted her studies to our worst evidence: witch hunting propaganda and trials that involved copious amounts of torture. She then assumed that such evidence was basically accurate, and that the Devil was "really" a Pagan god. None of these assumptions have held up under scrutiny.

In 1973, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English suggested that most witches were mid-wives and female healers. Their book *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses* convinced many feminists and Pagans that the Great Hunt was a pogrom aimed at traditional women healers. The Church and State sought to break the power of these women by accusing them of witchcraft, driving a wedge of fear between the wise-woman and her clients.

The evidence for this theory was -- and is -- completely anecdotal. Authors cited a number of cases involving healers, then simply assumed that this was what the "average" trial was like. However a mere decade after *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses* was published, we knew that this was not true. Healers made up a small percentage of the accused, usually between 2% and 20%, depending on the country. There was never a time or a place where the majority of accused witches were healers. In 1990, D. Harley's article, "Historians as demonologists: the myth of the midwife-witch" (in *Social History of Medicine* 3 (1990), pp. 1-26.) demonstrated that being a licensed midwife actually decreased a woman's chances of being charged.

And there was worse to come. Feminist and Pagan writers presented the healer-witch as the innocent, enlightened victim of the evil male witch hunters. Trials showed that as often as not, the "white" witch was an avid supporter of the "Burning Times." Diane Purkiss (*The Witch in History*) pointed out that "midwives were more likely to be found helping witch-hunters" than as victims of their inquiries. How did witches become witch-hunters? By blaming illnesses on their rivals. Feminist authors rightly lambasted male doctors who blamed unexplained illnesses on witches. Trial records suggest that this did



happen, though not terribly often. If you look at doctors' case books you find that in most cases doctors found natural causes when people thought they were bewitched. When they did diagnose witchcraft, doctors almost never blamed a particular healer or witch. They were trying to explain their failure, not to destroy some individual.

Traditional healers and "white" witches routinely blamed diseases on witchcraft. For a doctor, diagnosing "witchcraft" was admitting failure. Medicine could do nothing against magick, and doctors were loathe to admit that they were powerless against a disease. However baneful magick was the forte of the helpful (or "white" witch). Folk healers regularly blamed illnesses on magick and offered counter-spells to cure their patients. Many were even willing to divine the name of the cursing witch, for a fee.

f) Gender Issues One basic fact about the Great Witch Hunt stands out: most of the people accused were women. Even during the Hunt itself, commentators noticed this. Some speculated that there were 10,000 female witches for every male witch, and a host of misogynist explanations were trotted out to account for this fact. Later, the predominance of women led some feminists to theorize that "witch" and "woman" were virtually synonymous, that the persecution was caused by Europe's misogyny.

Overall, approximately 75% -80% of the accused were women. However this percentage varied dramatically. In several of the Scandinavian countries, equal numbers of men and women were accused. In Iceland over 90% of the accused were men. Central Europe killed the most witches, and it killed many more women than men -- this is why the overall percentages are so badly skewed.

Proponents of the misogyny theory generally ignore these variations. Many simply do not discuss male witches. One of the most egregious examples comes from Anne Llewellyn Barstow's *Witchcraze*. Barstow says that Iceland did not have a "real" witch hunt. Now, Iceland killed more witches than Ireland, Russia, and Portugal combined. Barstow claims that all these countries had "real" hunts, and offers no explanation of what made Iceland's deaths "unreal." The only thing I can see is that almost all Icelandic witches were men, and Barstow's theory cannot handle that.

Given the sexism of the times, it's not difficult to find shockingly misogynist witch trials. But misogyny does not explain the trial patterns we see. The beginning and end of the persecution don't correlate to any notable shifts in women's rights. Trials clustered around borders -- are borders more misogynist than interior regions? Ireland killed four witches, Scotland a couple thousand -- are the Scots that much more sexist? Barstow admits that Russia was every bit as misogynist as Germany, yet it killed only ten witches. Her theory can't explain why, and so she simply insists that there were probably lots of other Russian witches killed and they were probably mostly women. We've just lost all the evidence that would support her theory.

### From Nine Million to Forty Thousand

The most dramatic changes in our vision of the Great Hunt centered on the death toll. Back before trial surveys were available, estimates of the death toll were almost 100% pure speculation. The only thing our literary evidence told us was that a lot of witches died. Witch hunting propaganda talked about thousands and thousands of executions. Literature focused on crazes, the largest and most sensational trials around. But we had no idea how accurate the literary evidence was, or how common trials actually

were. So early death toll estimates, which ranged from several hundred thousand up to a high of nine million, were simply people trying to guess how much "a lot" of witches was.

Today, the process is completely different. Historians begin by counting all the executions/trials listed in an area's court records. Next they estimate how much evidence we've lost: what years and courts we're missing data for. Finally they survey the literary evidence, to see if any large witch trials occurred during the gaps in the evidence. There's still guess-work involved in today's estimates and many areas have not yet been systematically studied. But we now have a solid data-base to build our estimates from, and our figures are getting more specific as further areas are studied.

When the first trial record studies were completed, it was obvious that early estimates were fantastically high. Trial evidence showed that witch crazes were not everyday occurrences, as literature suggested. In fact most countries only had one or two in all of the Great Hunt.

To date, less than 15,000 definite executions have been discovered in all of Europe and America combined. (If you would like a table of the recorded and estimated death tolls throughout Europe, and a full list of the sources for these figures, send me a note at [jennyg@compuserve.com](mailto:jennyg@compuserve.com).) Even though many records are missing, it is now clear that death tolls higher than 100,000 are not believable.

Three scholars have attempted to calculate the total death toll for the Great Hunt using the new evidence. Brian Levack (*The Witch Hunt in Early Modern Europe*) surveyed regional studies and found that there were approximately 110,000 witch trials. Levack focused on recorded trials, not executions, because in many cases we have evidence that a trial occurred but no indication of its outcome. On average, 48% of trials ended in an execution, therefore he estimated that 60,000 witches died. This is slightly higher than 48% to reflect the fact that Germany, the center of the persecution, killed more than 48% of its witches.

Ronald Hutton (*The Pagan Religions of the British Isles* and "Counting the Witch Hunt", an unpublished essay) used a different methodology. First he surveyed the regional studies and counted up the number of estimated deaths they contained. When he ran into an uncounted area, he looked for a counted area which matched it as closely as possible, in terms of population, culture, and the intensity of witch hunting mentioned in literary evidence. He then assumed that the uncounted area would kill roughly as many witches as the counted area. Using this technique, he estimated that 40,000 witches died in the Great Hunt.

Anne Llewellyn Barstow (*Witchcraze*) estimated that 100,000 witches died, but her reasoning was flawed. Barstow began with Levack's 60,000 deaths. Then she increased it to 100,000 for two reasons: 1) To compensate for lost records; and 2) Because new trials are still being found.

This may sound reasonable, but it's not. The 110,000 estimated witch trials that Levack based his calculations on already did contain a large allowance for lost records. Barstow was apparently unaware of this, and added more deaths for no good reason. Her point about new trials is true, but irrelevant. Yes, more deaths are being discovered each year. But the more we find, the lower the death toll goes. This makes sense once you understand how historians make their estimates. "New" trials aren't trials we never dreamed existed. They appear when we count areas and courts that haven't been counted before.

Historians have always known that our data was imperfect, and they always included estimates for lost trials. So when you find "new" executions, you can't simply add them to the total death toll: you also have to subtract the old estimate they're replacing. And since old estimates were generally far too high, newly "found" trials usually end up lowering the death toll.

### Why It Matters

These changes make it critically important to use up-to-date research if you're investigating historical witchcraft. We have perhaps 20 times as much information as we had two decades ago. Witchcraft studies has also become an inter-disciplinary field. Once the domain of historians alone, it now attracts anthropologists and sociologists who offer radically new interpretations of the Great Hunt.

Anthropologists point out the ubiquity of witchcraft beliefs, demonstrating that the Great Hunt was not an exclusively European phenomenon. Sociologists draw chilling parallels between the Great Hunt and recent panics over Satanic cults, evidence which hints that we're still not out of the shadow of the Burning Times.

We Neopagans now face a crisis. As new data appeared, historians altered their theories to account for it. We have not. Therefore an enormous gap has opened between the academic and the "average" Pagan view of witchcraft. We continue to use of out-dated and poor writers, like Margaret Murray, Montague Summers, Gerald Gardner, and Jules Michelet. We avoid the somewhat dull academic texts that present solid research, preferring sensational writers who play to our emotions. For example, I have never seen a copy of Brian Levack's *The Witch Hunt in Early Modern Europe* in a Pagan bookstore. Yet half the stores I visit carry Anne Llewellyn Barstow's *Witchcraze*, a deeply flawed book which has been ignored or reviled by most scholarly historians.

We owe it to ourselves to study the Great Hunt more honestly, in more detail, and using the best data available. Dualistic fairy tales of noble witches and evil witch hunters have great emotional appeal, but they blind us to what happened. And what could happen, today. Few Pagans commented on the haunting similarities between the Great Hunt and America's panic over Satanic cults. Scholars noticed it; we didn't. We say "Never again the Burning!" But if we don't know what happened the first time, how are we ever going to prevent it from happening again?

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