

History of Witchcraft

Early-European Witchcraft

The earliest historical records of witchcraft in Europe [such as law codes, poems, heroic tales] reveal that it was divided into two distinct traditions of magical belief. In the far north, from Iceland eastward to the Baltic lands and Russia, magic was the preserve of specialists, the shamans, who drummed, danced, and chanted their way into trances in which their spirits left their bodies to accomplish the necessary work. Every tribe or clan needed to have one, and misfortune was blamed on hostile shamans. Most were male, but a female shaman was acceptable if no man with the necessary gift was available.

Across the rest of Europe, among the Greeks, Romans, Germans, and Celts alike, a different system prevailed. Men were regarded as able to learn magic, and to read omens, explain unusual events, and work sorcery. Women, by contrast, were treated as repositories of powerful and primeval natural magic. They were brought in to give advice, as seers or prophets, whenever normal social structures broke down. They also featured prominently as natural healers; conversely, they were especially feared for their ability to use that innate power for evil purposes. Hence to most ancient Europeans witches were usually female.

Hence, also, the pagan peoples of Europe regularly executed people for the alleged crime of witchcraft. This situation was ended by the coming of Christianity, which suppressed witch-hunting with a simple theological argument; if there was indeed a single all-powerful God, then no magic could be worked except by his will, and therefore witches were actually ineffective, and deluded. The result was an almost

complete halt to executions for witchcraft in Europe for most of the Middle Ages.

Laws against Witchcraft

Many Kings and Queens during the 16th and the 17th century, were very against the practice of Witchcraft. They hated the idea that there was a group of people who were 'witches.' To make this clear to people that the Kings and Queens of England, did not like it, they actually executed people.

Henry VIII [1509-1547] believed that witches were plotting to kill him. In 1542 a law was passed which said that witches should be punished by death. This law was abolished in 1547, when Henry VIII died.

Elizabeths I [1558-1603] was persuaded by her fellow Protestants that she should introduce new and tougher laws against the act of Witchcraft. In 1563 a new law was introduced. This law said that death penalty will be sentenced if a witch kills a person using their magic. Witches who harmed people were put in prison for life.

Many of James I's ministers were Puritans. They told the King that he should introduce new, harsher laws against witches. In 1604 who was seen of having contact with evil spirits could be hanged for witchcraft [it did not matter if they did no harm].



