

Editorial

# Introduction to the Special Issue: Witchcraft, Demonology and Magic

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Received: 2 March 2020; Accepted: 3 April 2020; Published: 14 April 2020



Witchcraft and magic are topics of enduring interest for many reasons. Chief among these is their extraordinary interdisciplinarity: anthropologists, folklorists, historians, and more have contributed to build a body of work of extreme variety and consistence. Of course, this also means that the subjects themselves are not easy to assess. In a very general way, we can define witchcraft as a supernatural means to cause harm, death, or misfortune, while magic also belongs to the field of the supernatural, or at least esoteric knowledge, but can be used to less dangerous effects: such as for divination and astrology. In Western civilization, however, the witch hunt of Late Medieval–Early Modern times has set a very peculiar perspective in which diabolical witchcraft, the invention of the Sabbat and the persecution of many thousands of (mostly) female and (sometimes) male presumed witches, gave way to a phenomenon that is fundamentally different from traditional witchcraft, even if many case studies conducted in South America or Africa present similarities, especially in contemporary times (see [Wachtel 1992](#); [Geschiere 1997](#)). Another peculiarity of magic and witchcraft in Western civilization is given by the number of writings that detailed their nature, techniques, and effects: these include technical treatises about how to perform magic, such as in the case of necromancy (see [Kieckhefer 1998](#); [Gal et al. 2017](#)), or the many writings explaining the powers of witches from the point of view of judges and inquisitors.

Today, scholars generally agree on the so-called “cumulative concept of Western witchcraft”, meaning that, if there is one thing of which recent scholarship about witch hunting has assured us, it is that all mono-causality theories must be ruled out, as so many factors have been discovered and investigated: the change in climate, which occurred around the year 1600, and its socio-economic fallout ([Behringer 1997](#): Id., [Behringer 2009](#)); the scientific debate that framed many of the phenomena related to witchcraft ([Clark 1997](#)); the social conditions in village communities and how often bottom-up pressure gave way to trials against alleged witches ([Briggs 2002](#)); the reading of folk beliefs in light of heretical prosecutions and demonology ([Kieckhefer 1976](#)); the centrality of demonology ([Ostorero 1995](#); [Boureau 2004](#)); and the role of humanistic culture in the developing of witch hunts ([Montesano 2018](#)). All of these, and many other approaches, have proven very useful for understanding witch hunts, but only as pieces of a puzzle.

This Special Issue of *Religions* dedicated to witchcraft, demonology, and magic features nine articles that deal with four different regions of Europe (England, Germany, Hungary, and Italy) between Late Medieval and modern times in different contexts and social *milieus*. Far from pretending to offer a complete picture, they focus on some topics that are central to the research in those fields. The role of monks and priests in performing occult sciences and ritual magic is analyzed by Rita Voltmer (*Debating the Devil's Clergy. Demonology and the Media in Dialogue with Trials. 14th to 17th Century*) in a long and articulated essay that takes into account the polemics between Catholics and Protestants in Germany, while Francis Young (*The Dissolution of the Monasteries and the Democratization of Magic in Post-Reformation England*) focuses on the role of friars and monks in England before and after the dissolution of monasteries (1536–1540), which of course provided a turning point in their role as

magic performers. Friars, especially Franciscan and Dominican preachers and inquisitors, and their understanding of the witchcraft phenomenon are central in Fabrizio Conti's article (*Notes on the Nature of Beliefs in Witchcraft: Folklore and Classical Culture in Fifteenth Century Mendicant Traditions*), this time seen from the point of view of a history of ideas. Fabiana Ambrosi (Giovan Battista Codronchi's *De morbis Veneficis ac Veneficiis—1595. Medicine, Exorcism and Inquisition in Counter-Reformation Italy*) and Ismael Del Olmo ("Such Fictitious Evil Spirits": Adriaan Koerbagh's Rejection of Biblical Demons and Demonic Possession in *A Light Shining in Dark Places—1668*) deal mainly with a history of ideas, concentrating their attention on two intellectuals: Giovan Battista Codronchi, a key figure of sixteenth-century medicine and Adriaan Koerbagh, exponent of the early Dutch Enlightenment, whose thinking is related to Thomas Hobbes. Many among the contributors deal with popular magic and beliefs or with the circulation of ideas in different social and cultural tiers. This is the case for Helen Parish ("*Paltrie Vermin, Cats, Mice, Toads, and Weasils*": *Witches, Familiars, and Human-Animal Interactions in the English Witch Trials*), who explores the vast domain of beliefs related to the metamorphosis of demons and witches in English trials, as well as for Vincenzo Tedesco (*Treasure Hunt—Roman Inquisition and Magical Practices Ad Inveniendos Thesuros in Southern Tuscany*) who studies archival sources looking for a practice, that of magical treasure hunts, which has a long and complicated history. Similar to Tedesco, Debora Moretti (*Angels or Demons? Interactions and Borrowings between Folk Traditions, Religion and Demonology in Early Modern Italian Witchcraft Trials*) devotes her study to central Italy and the Roman Inquisition's trials dealing with folkloric magic. Ildiko Sz. Kristof ("*Charming Sorcerers*" or "*Soldiers of Satan*"? *Witchcraft and Magic in the Eyes of Protestant/Calvinist Preachers in Early Modern Hungary*) gives an account of a topic not well known outside of Hungary: the definitions of witchcraft in Protestant/Calvinist preachers as read in Hungarian sources.

As a whole, those articles, some of them provided by young scholars at the beginning of their careers, show the variety of approaches as well as the vivacity and richness of current historiography and fit well within the current debate, suggesting that the puzzle of studies about witchcraft, demonology, and magic still needs many pieces to give us a better understanding of these multifaced phenomena.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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