

## Witch-Burning in Europe

By Samuel Ouellet

Throughout history, it has happened often that specific groups of people have been stigmatized, tortured and killed. We can think of the persecution of the Jews by the Nazis during the Second World War as an example. In Europe, during the Early Modern period (around 1500-1800 AD), an even more striking killing spree took place: the witch-hunt. According to research based on trial records, about 50,000 people were executed (eighty percent of them being women). Not everyone tried for witchcraft was ultimately executed; however, depending on the region, most of them ended up hanged or burned. It is interesting to look at the different causes that have been found to explain the sudden fear of witches at that period of time. (Jones)

Unlike many beliefs, even though it officially linked the hunt for witches with the inquisition, the clergy was not the only group responsible for the propagation of the fear of witches. For the most part, trials against witches occurred in local communities, where church control was not as prevalent as in big cities. Central European communities sometimes used epidemics and natural cataclysms, such as earthquakes and floods, to justify the massive trials of witches. The most striking data is that about eighty percent of witch-burnings were women. The society at that time was controlled exclusively by men, and any kind of female with power was dreaded and seen as "unnatural". Specialists also use the term "Gendercide" to describe the hunts of that era, since we can affirm that misogyny is at the base of the witch-hunting period. (Barry, 49)



If there is a particular group of people that was targeted and categorized as witches, it would be mostly elderly women. Often, aged women would live on their own and outside of patriarchal control. Being considered useless and a burden for society, elderly women were often accused of witchcraft by local authorities. It was the best and easiest way for them to get rid of the “unproductive” citizen. We also know that older women had the knowledge to use medicinal herbs and treatments that were considered “unnatural” at that time. These two reasons made elderly women the perfect victims of witch-hunting. (Jones)

Even though the witch-burning era is considered as a gendercide on women, there is still a small proportion of the male population that was accused of witchcraft. Just for the same reasons as older women were accused, poor men with no family were an easy target for the witch-hunting participants. Even though the general thinking is that men are the only ones responsible for the witch-burning period, it has been proven that women played an important role in the accusations. It was not uncommon to see a woman accuse another woman of witchcraft due to jealousy or envy. Through internal gossip, some women would spread rumours about others and accuse them of using magical behaviour. However, it would be unfair to

neglect the role of men in the witch-hunting process, since ultimately they were the persecutors. To maintain their patriarchal domination, male authorities used witch trials as a tool to put women in their place, and to make sure the traditional gender roles were respected. (Barry, 64)

Even if the witch-burning practice stopped in Europe a long while ago, it is unknown by most people that witch trials are still going on in some parts of the world. It is still a practice used in South African countries, but the reasons and causes differ slightly from those of the Early Modern period. Anyhow, it is important to denounce this barbarian torture and hopefully make it disappear forever. (Jones)

The following website has further details concerning witch-hunts in Africa:

<http://community.seattletimes.nwsources.com/archive/?date=19941229&slug=1949669>

## Works Cited

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