

Witchcraft Amongst the German and Slavonic People

Excerpts from Julio Cara Baroja "The World of the Witches" 1964. Translated by Nigel Glendinning

The type of witch known in classical antiquity is not very different with the one with which we are familiar today. She continued to exist in Europe a long time after the fall of the Roman Empire and even down to our own times. The same, as we shall see, is true of the witch amongst European peoples who were not part of the classical world.

In the first place, let us consider those people of Germanic origin whose magical interests and activities are well documented. If we accept the evidence about them, it would appear that, among the Germanic tribes too, each individual social class had its own particular brand of magic; even the gods used magic under certain circumstances. The practice of magic in these tribes also corresponded to their logical and social order (the 'logos' and the 'ethos'), however surprising this may seem. This is also true, of course, of other communities which have recently been studied in detail; maleficent magic flourishes during certain states of tension.

In the highest levels of Germanic society the kings practiced magic publicly, and their success was more or less generally admitted.

Among the Swedes, Erik 'of the windy hat' had remarkable powers as a king and magician. In other cases, the trials and misfortunes of the community were attributed to the fact that the reigning monarch lacked the necessary magical power to deal with the adverse circumstances. But coming down in the social scale we also discover that in ancient Scandinavia every magical activity was thought to be the property of a particular family. Thus, 'all' the sooth-sayers, 'all' the witches and 'all' the magicians could be traced back to three specific forbears, just as the giants could.

The division of human activities according to families pre-supposes the handing down of knowledge from the period of myths. Witchcraft or maleficent magic has its own special terminology, and is completely defined by the term *seid*.

There are passages in the Icelandic sagas in which whole families are accredited with the power of witchcraft; father, mother, and children. However, as in the classical world, women, or particular types of women, are believed to have more special powers.

The passage in Tacitus's *Germania* which relates how the men of that country believed women to be sacred and always attached great importance to their opinions, warnings, and advice, has been the object of numerous conflicting interpretations - like other parts of that work.

But if the cases of *Velleda* or *Ganna*, both heroines of German history, can be adducted in support of this view, there is also good reason to believe that fear as well as respect and veneration was sometimes felt for women; fear of the spells of which they were held to be capable.

Both early Germanic literature and historical works, written in Latin about the Germanic peoples at a later date, make frequent references to the ambivalent position of women in that society.

There are, for example, numerous passages in the Edda which allude to the skill of women in magic and the dangers run by those who allow themselves to be dominated by women : " Flee from the dangers of sleeping in the arms of a witch; let her not hold you close to her. She will make you disregard the assemblies of the people and the words of the prince; you will refuse to eat and shun the company of other men, and you will feel sad when you go to your bed. "

Such were the supernatural warnings given to Lodfafner. These and other passages seem to support the case for the existence of a "Circean complex" which has completely controlled men's actions at various periods.

The picture of the ' old witch ' is also extremely common in the Edda. Such a one, for example, was Angerbode, mother of the wolves who will ultimately eat the sun and moon:

"East of Midgard, in the iron forest, sat the old witch. She led the fearful race of Fenrer."

At the same time, witchcraft, or magic for evil ends, is the constant subject of criticism as one of the most anti-social activities possible.

But it must be emphasized that in the pagan German world the gods were not only aiders and abettors of witchcraft, but sorcerers themselves. Loke or Loki, the evil one, was able to say to Odin, father of the gods:

"They say you have practiced magic in Samsøe, that you have made spells like any Vala: you have wandered through the country disguised as a witch. What, I say, could be viler in a man than this?" The same Loki could shout at Freya: "Be silent! You are a poisoner and you work magic. Thanks to your spells the powers that were propitious to your brother have turned against him."

There can be no doubt, therefore, that magic has its place in the life of the gods as well as men. The question that Lucan asked himself about the gods on Olympus might well have been put by a German about those in Valhalla. A *vis magica* exists which fascinates or coerces them just as it controls the strong and the meek in the world.

Several legends which have survived in more modern versions from those which have so far been quoted prove that the Germanic peoples were dominated by a fear of witches in their everyday life.

They frequently attributed the misfortunes of their kings to witches. One of the best known of these legends is the one about the death of the Danish king Frotho III. The usual source for this tale in books on magic is the German historian A. Krantz.

The king, who is said to have lived at the same time as Christ, seems to have used magic in much the same way as other more or less legendary figures. He had a witch at his court who was famed for her magic. Her son had great faith in her powers and plotted with her on one occasion to rob the king's treasury, since the king was advanced in years. When they had carried out the robbery, they went to an isolated house they owned far from the court. The king, following the hints of a number of people, connected their flight with the robbery and decided to go in person and look for them. When the witch saw him coming she used her magical powers to change her son into a bull who went out to meet him. The king sat down to look at the animal. But the witch gave him little time for contemplation. The bull charged him violently and killed him.

This is roughly the story as Krantz has it, although it should be borne in mind that there are other slightly different versions. For present purposes, however, this will serve. The important thing in this instance is the general outline of the legend. It is also worthwhile pointing out that the person chiefly responsible for popularizing the story believed that old witches were perfectly capable of achieving the same or even more astonishing results in his own times (the 15th and 16th centuries).

The Germanic world was dominated by belief in witchcraft from its northern extremities to the shores of the Mediterranean where the Visigoths and Lombards lived; from the steppes of Eastern Europe to the Atlantic islands. Even at the height of their power, men lived in constant fear of witches.

This fear and hatred led the Germans to accuse their enemies of practicing witchcraft or of being descended from evil witches. An example of this is the traditional story of the origin of the Huns. This was first written down by a historian of the Goths called Jornandes or Jordanes, in the sixth century, and it was later reproduced and modified by many other historians. According to the legend, king Filimer, after conducting a survey into the customs of his people at a very early period, discovered that a number of sorceresses lived among them. These he banished to the remote and deserted regions of Scythia so that they should have no ill effect on others. However, as a result of the contact between these women and certain foul spirits who wandered about the same deserts, the Huns were born. Those were the sorceresses called alrunae or haliurunnae which also appear in other texts. To call someone a "son of a witch" is a very ancient insult.

It is an equally hallowed custom to attribute black powers to one's nearest communal enemy. So far as the specific case of the Huns is concerned, it is highly probable that witchcraft was common among them (just as later it was common among the Magyars and Hungarians). But their bad reputation may have been partly due to the intense fear they inspired in others; in other words, it may have been due to the feeling of comparative impotence that others felt in their presence.

More or less mythical stories about the power of specific witches are also to be found in the old Slav chronicles.

There is, for instance, a legendary episode in the earliest history of Bohemia which is worth recording. A certain chief named Krok died at the end of the seventh century, in 690, and left three daughters. The first, Kazi or Brelum, had a considerable knowledge of medicinal plants, which she put to practical use. The second, called Tecka or Tekta, was a sooth-sayer and diviner; whenever there was a robbery in the country she revealed the person who was responsible and, if anything was lost, she could tell where it was. The third, Libuscha, Libussa, or Lobussa, was a sybil, skilled in witchcraft and vastly better at it than any man or woman of her times. Thanks to her magic, she was able to make the Bohemians elect Przemislaw as their leader, and then marry him. She predicted the rise of Prague and died after a long and glorious life. However, when she died, women had become so accustomed to directing affairs that they refused to submit to the rule of men again. A young maid named Wlasca, a born leader, called the women together and addressed them approximately in these words: "Our lady Libussa governed this kingdom while she was alive. Why should not I now govern with your help? I know all her secrets; the skill in spells and the art of augury which were her sister Tecka's are mine; I also know as much medicine as Brelum did; for I was not in her service for nothing. If you will join with me and help me, I believe we may get complete control over men. "

Her ideas met with the approval of the women she had gathered together. So she gave them a potion to drink to make them loathe their husbands, brothers, lovers, and the whole male sex immediately. Fortified by this, they slew nearly all the men and laid siege to Przemislaw in the castle of Diewin. The women are supposed to have ruled for seven years, and a series of rather comical laws are said to have been passed by them. However, in the end, Przemislaw returned to the throne, for he too was something of a magician. Later authors retold this story and added their own particular interpretation.

The Middle Ages was a great period for preserving traditions as well as for making them, and the magical processes described in the texts are monotonously repeated. Ones which are already to be found in the Vedic poems reappear in the darkest years of the Middle Ages and continue to recur even today.

The story of King Duff of Scotland, for instance, supposed to have taken place at some time between A.D 967 and 972, follows a typically well-worn pattern. According to the chronicles, an illness which he caught was attributed to witchcraft. Investigations were made and some witches were eventually found cooking a waxen image of the king over a slow fire. This explained the nature of the king's illness, since he was in a continual sweat. Once the women had been condemned the king was restored to health.

The Nature of Civil and Religious Laws

The laws of the barbarians, written in Latin and devised for the northern peoples who ruled for centuries over former provinces of the Roman Empire, abound in provisions against sorcerers and those who followed their advice.

In Book 6, subtitle 2, of the Spanish Fuero Juzgo, for example, one finds four laws of the Chindasvint period which condemn all possible varieties of magic. The first of these

applies to servants and simple folk who consult ariolos, auspices, and vaticinatores - diviners, fortunetellers, and enchanter - about the health or death of the king. The second refers to those who give poisonous herbs to others. The third is about sorcerers and rain-makers who ruin the wine and the crops by their spells; those who disturb men's minds by invoking the Devil; and those who make nocturnal sacrifices to the Devil. The fourth condemns those who use verbal or written spells to harm the bodies, minds, and property of others.

These Spanish laws and others, both civil and ecclesiastical, of the same period, condemn magic in general, without any specific reference to the sex of the person in question. But similar laws in old Gaul and other countries which were also under the rule of Christianized barbarians make frequent references to the sex of the sorcerers and also make other allusions which are worth examination. Perhaps certain types of witches were more common in Gaul than in Spain under the Visigoths.

A passage in Pomponius Mela which has often been discussed seems to imply that there were women who practiced magic for beneficent purposes among the ancient Gauls. Nine of them were attached to a temple, and lived under a rule of perpetual chastity. Whatever the truth of this may be, it does not seem to affect the general point about the place of women in witchcraft.

We know from other sources, not wholly reliable ones, however, that witches abounded in Gaul in the later period of the Roman Empire. They were occasionally consulted by people of high rank, and were equated with Druids (as 'Druidesses' are called in texts which relate to the third century AD). These witches continued to multiply and thrive in later periods, and were a source of worry to more than one family of high social standing at the court of the Merovingian kings. This is revealed in the works of the best known historians of the period, who also point out that more than one woman paid dearly for her reputation as a witch.

In 578 Queen Fredegond lost a son. Suspicious individuals suggested that his death had been caused by magic and spells. A courtier accused Mummolus, one of the prefects (who was also disliked by the queen) of instigating the crime. But those who actually committed it were said to be certain women of Paris. The latter confessed under torture to the murder of the queen's son, and admitted killing many other people too. It is not hard to imagine the fate of the prefect and the ladies in question.

This was not the only episode in the violent life of queen Fredegond in which witches had an important role. Earlier, she accused her step-child Clovis of killing two of her sons with the aid or complicity of an old witch and her daughter. These three she also managed to kill. Yet this did not stop her from making spells and consulting witches herself when she felt like it.

Fredegond was no exception in the land over which she reigned. The repression of magic, which she herself practiced and which she accused others of practicing, was one of the major concerns of the civil and religious authorities at the time and at later periods.

Sometimes, however, there are noticeable variations in the ways in which repressive measures are carried out; a divergence of opinion between legal and ecclesiastical authorities.

It is a long time since a Frenchman called Garinet collected together the most famous laws passed by the Frankish kings and their successors against the practice of magic. This was ranked as one of the manifestations of paganism which had to be eradicated (as it was in the last laws made under the Roman Empire). More recently these laws have been studied in a more scholarly way. But Garinet's book is still useful.

Superficially, there is little difference between these laws and those passed by the Christian Roman emperors and by the Visigothic and Ostrogothic rulers in their respective kingdoms. Nor do these laws differ from others known to have been passed during the same dark ages in England, Germany, and Hungary. The laws are apparently so similar that books on them are inevitably boring to read. But they are worth studying, even if not in great detail; for suddenly, amongst the mass of virtually identical items, we find one that is quite different and extremely significant. As early as AD 743, Childeric III published an edict condemning pagan and magical practices as if they were much the same thing. Amongst the former are included sacrifices to the dead, and other sacrifices which were still being made at that time not to the old gods, but to Holy Martyrs and confessors in places close to the churches themselves. Among magical practices listed, we find ligatures, fortune-telling, augury, incantations, and phylacteries.

Charlemagne, following in the footsteps of Childeric and other Merovingian kings, published several edicts urging his subjects to forsake their superstitious beliefs. When mere exhortation proved useless, he resorted to edicts which laid down sentences appropriate to these crimes. These edicts specifically condemned all kinds of witchcraft, such as the making of wax figures, summoning devils and using love philtres, disturbing the atmosphere and raising storms, putting curses on people and causing the fruits of the earth to wither away, drying up the milk of some people's domestic animals to give it to others, practising astrology and making talismans. The law laid down that in future, those who practiced the arts of the Devil would be dishonoured and treated like murderers, poisoners, and thieves; those who consulted with them and made use of them would be given a similar sentence, and in some cases, that meant death.

In AD 873 Charles the Bald issued a decree in Quierzy-sur-Oise, declaring that he desired to fulfill his kingly duties laid down by the saints in a proper manner. He had learnt that sorcerers and witches had appeared in various parts of his kingdom, bringing illness, and even death to a number of people. And his intention was to drive out the godless, and those who made philtres and poisons: "We therefore expressly recommend the lords of the realm to seek out and apprehend those who are guilty of these crimes in their respective countries. If they are convicted, whether they are men or women, they must perish, for justice and the law demands it. If they are under suspicion or accused without being convicted, and if the testimony against them is not sufficient to prove their guilt, they shall be submitted to the will of God. This shall decide whether

they are to be pardoned or condemned. But the associates and accomplices of those who are really guilty, both men and women, shall be put to death, so that all knowledge of such a heinous crime may vanish from our dominions ".

These three texts of three different periods may suffice to show how hard civil law was on those who were accused of crimes of witchcraft in the eighth and ninth centuries. Probably, these laws were often enforced in an arbitrary way, and people must frequently have been accused of such crimes in much the same violent and fanatical manner as queen Fredegond accused her stepson. The dangers of arraigning people who might be totally innocent had yet to be recognized.

This explains why the Church, which absolutely condemned paganism, let alone magic, from a theological point of view, promulgated a series of dispositions which would, on occasion, soften the harsh effects of civil law. This moderation may partially been due to propagandistic motives, aimed to attract the great mass of people who remained unconverted to Christianity in the country areas and small towns. But perhaps the more moderate dispositions of the Church may reflect the ideas of St. Augustine.

J. B. Thiers in his *Traite des Superstitions* collected together a large number of references to Canon laws of Church Councils and to other decrees which severely condemned the practice of magic, dating from the sixth, seventh and eighth centuries and later periods also. Some of these emphasize the dangerous spiritual effects of magic, but others insist that sorcerers themselves are often victims of the illusions and deceits of the Devil, and deny that is necessary to believe categorically in their powers.

Even after the promulgation of the decrees of Charlemagne which have already been mentioned, the prelates who were summoned to the Council of Tours in 813 still felt the need for priests to warn the faithful that spells could not help sick or dying persons or animals; they were nothing but illusions or tricks of the Devil. In other instances the same ecclesiastical authorities disputed validity of facts which civil law accepted, or qualified the conclusions that were drawn from them.

A good example of this is that of Argobard, Archbishop of Lyons (779-840) who, in spite of the general views held at the time, severely criticized those who believed that certain human beings were capable of bringing on rain and hail storms. He also censured those who held Duke Grimald responsible for sending sorcerers to throw harmful magic powders into fields, forests, and streams, when oxen belonging to the smallholders were stricken by an epidemic.

The prelates who attended the sixth Council of Paris in 829 were in closer agreement with the civil laws and edicts. The eleventh canon of the council expressed the following opinion: "There are other very dangerous evils which are certainly legacies of paganism, such as magic, astrology, incantation and spells, poisoning, divination, enchantment, and the interpretation of dreams. These evils ought to be severely punished, as the laws of God ordain. But there is no doubt, as many learned men have witnessed, that there are some people capable of so perverting the minds of others with the Devil's illusions (by giving them philtres, drugged food, and phylacteries) that they become confused and

insensible to the ills they are made to suffer. It is also said that these people can disturb the air with their spells, send hail storms, take produce and milk from one person to give to another, and do a thousand similar things. If any such be found, they should be severely punished, particularly since, in their malice and temerity, they fear not the Devil, nor do they renounce him publicly. "

There is undoubtedly a conflict between these views and Agobard's: one which is found time and again in later periods. It even occurs in certain civil laws, some of which put forward opinions which are flatly contradicted by other laws in the same code.

There is, for example, an act dated 789 amongst the laws of the Frankish kings; it refers to Saxony and condemns belief in strigae and their ability to eat men, expressing the view that they ought to be burnt for it. There is clearly a connection between this and another law to be found in the *Leges Langobardicae*, dating probably from the reign of king Rotharius. Yet, although it is conceived in much the same spirit, this law holds that, from a Christian point of view, strigae or mascae cannot be capable of the acts they are believed to perform.

On the other hand, the popes who were concerned with the conversion of central European, and above all, northern peoples, gave very categorical instructions on the subject to kings and prelates of the Church. Pope Gregory II, for example, ordered Bishop Martinian and the priest called George who went with him to Bavaria, to forbid spells and enchantments, which were relics of paganism, although he makes no reference to the punishment of those involved.

On one occasion, Pope Gregory VII wrote to the king of Denmark asking him to avoid, as far as possible, persecuting innocent women who were thought to have caused storms or epidemics. Earlier, Pope Leo VII had sent an instruction dated 936 to Archbishop Gerhard of Lorch, intended for the authorities of southern Germany, which again took a lenient view of those accused of witchcraft. Answering a specific inquiry he maintained that "although by the old law, such people were condemned to death, ecclesiastical law spared their lives so that they could repent".

This rather ambiguous situation is typical of a period of transition like the Middle Ages. On the one hand, we have the passionate beliefs of the masses just converted to Christianity or still pagan, and on the other, the doubt and pragmatism of the ecclesiastical authorities in the face of popular beliefs and civil law.