

Encyclopedia of Witchcraft: The Western Tradition

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Heresy

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Witchcraft's heretical roots are often largely underestimated, because the large European witch hunts date from the early modern era and most historians of witchcraft are therefore experts in this period, with little or no knowledge of late medieval heresy. Even students of the witch hunt's medieval beginnings (e.g., Ginzburg 1991) have all too often underestimated witchcraft's heretical heritage. Ginzburg, for example, drew a straight line from the persecution of the lepers (around 1320) and the Jews (around 1350), to that of witches (fifteenth century), thereby almost completely neglecting the heretics.

Important exceptions to this rule include Jeffrey Russell (1972), Norman Cohn (1993), Brian Levack (1993), and Andreas Blauert (1989). Russell argued that witchcraft should be viewed as a form of heresy, and that heresy was far more important for understanding it than magic. Russell (1972: 19, 39f., 133, 267–269) also contended that early witch hunts occurred mainly in places where heretics had allegedly previously been found, including southern France, the Netherlands, the Rhineland, northern Italy, and the Alps (a region to which heretics had withdrawn, but not an especially backwards area). On the other hand, Russell incorrectly believed (63ff.) that both witchcraft and heresy existed already in the Early Middle Ages. Cohn (1993, chaps. 1, 3, 4) saw late medieval heresy only in its distorted, demonized form, and used his observations to construct a stereotype that he believed was originally used to defame the early Christians. Levack (1993, 43f.) agreed with Cohn and claimed that the idea of the witches' countersociety, as expressed in their confessions, originated in the rhetoric of the invectives clerics of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries used against heretics, and developed a life of its own. Blauert directed attention to the territory of modern-day Switzerland and especially western Switzerland, where (with the important exception of Dauphiné) the last Waldensian-hunts and the first witch hunts took place simultaneously in the first half of the fifteenth century.

Starting with the cumulative idea of witchcraft as presented in the *Errores Gazariorum* (Errors of the Gazars or Gazarii) written in the Aosta valley before 1436/1438 and one of the earliest descriptions of a witches' sect, one can indeed differentiate between heretical and magical elements. Heretical elements included initiation into the sect; the pact; the nighttime gatherings; the sect's organization and the accusation of hypocrisy; the magical flight of witches and warlocks to the witches' Sabbat; some of the *maleficia* (harmful magic), especially infanticide; and motives for joining the sect (vindictiveness and hedonism, as well as sexual desire). Even the tract's title went back to the Cathars; *gazarii* is a form of "Cathar" found mostly in northern Italy (Ostorero et al. 1999, 301–303). Although it had been effectively wiped out by the early fourteenth century, the heresy of the Cathars contributed a great deal to the cumulative concept of witchcraft.

The Cathars' name was derived from "cat" in Alain de Lille's twelfth-century polemic "because it is said that they [the Cathars] kiss a cat's posterior, in which form, it is said, the Devil appears to them" (*Dicuntur [Cathari] a catto, quia, ut dicitur, osculantur posteriora catti, in cuius specie, ut dicunt, apparet eis Lucifer*) (Lambert 1998, 43). One main feature of the Cathar movement, in its widespread form in thirteenth-century southern France, was dualism (or Manicheism): the role ascribed to the Devil as the creator of the visible world (Lambert 1998). This was an obvious parallel to later sects of witches, who also reputedly worshiped the Devil. The Cathars' most important sacrament was the *consolamentum*, which was first administered in the form of adult baptism upon acceptance into the sect, and later as the last rites, which were said to guarantee direct acceptance into heaven. Subsequently, after the Cathars had fled to the Pyrenees (Montaillou) to escape the Inquisition, this sacrament was possible only at night. Cathars thus held nighttime gatherings around the beds of the dying, to which the few remaining *perfecti* (the perfect ones, the master adepts) had to be brought, frequently from far away. If a *perfect* did not successfully administer the *consolamentum* to the dying person, his or her soul would have had to set out on a transmigration and could be reborn up to seven times. The chaste and vegetarian *perfect* asked those gathered at the death bed to administer the *melioramentum* (a sort of prayer or devotion) and required those present to accommodate him and offer him gifts. Those present often entered into a pact (or *convention*) with him, stating that they, too, wished to receive the *consolamentum* from him in their hour of death. According to the inquisitors, such accomplices were therefore guilty and were punished accordingly, although only recidivists were burned at the stake.

One must not ignore the fact that it was during the fight against the Cathar movement in southern France that the papal Inquisition was created in 1233, which employed a new inquisitorial method (Lambert 1998, 125, 127; also Levack 1993, 68–99). Both the Inquisition and inquisitorial procedure were responsible for the analogies and parallels between heresy and witchcraft. In the end, it was inquisitors such as Geoffrey d'Ablis (inquisitor in Carcassonne, 1308–1309), Bernard Gui

(inquisitor in Toulouse, 1307), and Jaques Fournier (bishop of Pamiers, 1318–1325) who wiped out the Cathar movement in its refuge in the Pyrenees.

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Nevertheless, remnants of the Cathar movement survived in the Alps, in Piedmont, between southern France and Lombardy, and next to Spain, the preferred refuge of the southern French Cathars. The Alpine valleys of Piedmont and Dauphiné were simultaneously a place of refuge for Waldensians. Especially in Piedmont toward the end of the fourteenth century (Merlo 1977), a mix (or syncretism) of the Cathar and Waldensian movements thus came into being, which bore a great deal of similarity to the doctrines of the later witches' sects. An interrogation led by inquisitor Antonio di Settimo on March 23, 1387, described the "synagogue of the Walsensians" taking place "in the hour of the first sleep" (*primum somnium*); the *consolamentum* (consisting of consecrated bread); the rejection of purgatory (a Waldensian characteristic); and a sexual orgy. The designation of Cathars as *gazarii*, which reappeared in the *Errores gazariorum*, also appeared here (Lambert 1998, 295). The Waldensians, who stood much closer to the orthodox Church and did not recognize dualism, served oddly enough as a mediator between the Cathar movement and witchcraft.

Around 1170, the Waldensian movement was started by a merchant from Lyons named Waldo, who not only devoted himself to poverty and preaching, but also drew inspiration from the Bible (Audisio 1998). Because it was then forbidden for laymen to preach or have knowledge of the Bible, the archbishop of Lyons condemned Waldo and his followers and expelled them in the early 1180s. Nevertheless, Waldo's teachings spread widely throughout Europe in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, reaching from southern France, Lombardy, Piedmont, and Dauphiné as far as Austria, Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, Brandenburg, and Pomerania. By the fourteenth century, Waldensianism had two distinct wings, German and Roman. Through drastic inquisitorial persecution, the German wing was almost completely exterminated by the end of the fourteenth century; practically only the Swiss Waldensians of Fribourg survived.

Persecution changed Waldensian behavior: while originally the Waldensians mainly denied the oath, which the Bible forbade, they later began to deny purgatory, which had already become prominent in the Latin Church. Waldensians believed that atonement must take place here and now, and could not be postponed until purgatory; therefore, the only sacrament that a Waldensian master (or apostle) could administer to his followers was confession. This took place during nighttime gatherings, as it was not otherwise possible, at which they also preached. Believers received their other sacraments from the orthodox Church, thus earning them accusations of hypocrisy. The

Roman wing of the Waldensian movement (active in Piedmont and Dauphiné) was decidedly more anticlerical than the German wing: the Roman wing attached no importance whatsoever to any sacrament administered by sinful Catholic priests. Their own masters were called *Barben* ("barbels," "beards") by the mid-fifteenth century, at the latest. Throughout the entire fourteenth century, the Waldensians of Dauphiné and Piedmont faced severe persecution from constantly present inquisitors. Persecutions against Waldensians in Dauphiné continued far into the fifteenth century, until a Crusade in 1488, and caused them to flee to southern France (to Provence, especially Luberon). They thus became the only medieval heretical sect to survive and join the Protestant Reformation in 1532, at the Synod of Chanforan.

We have already seen that a syncretism of Waldensian and Cathar movements with similarities to witchcraft emerged in late fourteenth-century Piedmont. Shortly afterward, in 1392–1394, 400 Waldensians were interrogated in Brandenburg and Pomerania, some of whom had recently been suspected of being devil worshipers, or Luciferians. Inquisitor Peter Zwicker did not believe this accusation, unlike his colleague in Piedmont, Antonio di Settimo; Zwicker found that these suspects were merely Waldensians. Such "Luciferians" had already been persecuted in Angermünde in 1336, and they too had been Waldensians; the roots of Luciferianism indeed came from the Cathar movement, albeit in a rather mutated form (Kurze 1968, 56f.; Patschovsky 1981, 660f.; Lambert 1998, 120). Furthermore, the German Cathars persecuted in the thirteenth century by Conrad of Marburg had been accused of being Luciferians, as were the Waldensians persecuted under this name in Schweidnitz in 1315, after the Cathars had been destroyed (Patschovsky 1991). These Luciferians suggest the stereotype of the demonized heretic portrayed by Cohn. The demonization of heresy ran parallel to the hereticization of magic; Pope John XXII put the Inquisition in charge of the latter through his 1326 bull *Super illius specula* (Upon His Watchtower) (Cohn 1993, 114f.).

The accusation of Luciferianism was transferred from the Waldensians to sects of witches and warlocks in the fifteenth century; they could be assimilated all the more easily, because neither sect had ever actually existed. Until the end of the fifteenth century (and well beyond), witches in French-speaking Switzerland were invariably called "heretics," or "*vaudois*." The necessary prerequisite for the seamless transfer of this label from one sect to another was a constant inquisition, with a continuous existence in western Switzerland that can be proven from 1399 (Andenmatten and Utz Tremp 1992). Its first sphere of activity was the city of Fribourg, where it conducted Waldensian trials in 1399 and 1430, finally destroying the German Waldensian movement (Utz Tremp 2000). In the second trial, one sees a change from heresy to witchcraft (also a form of

heresy). Practically all the heretics persecuted were clearly Waldensians. Trial records already termed their gatherings "sects" and "synagogues," exactly like later gatherings of witches in western Switzerland.

Surrounding the 1430 trial, however, a few instances arose of non-Waldensians who were not yet entirely witches. Such was the case of Itha Stucki, who came from the surrounding countryside, denounced because she allegedly knew "how to make a wagon move on its own, without outside aid" (*quod uxor Willini Stucky sciebat taliter parare currum et artificiare, quod per se sine alio adiutorio ibat*). Her judges, including the inquisitor Ulric de Torrenté, pursued the matter further and found that Itha Stucki reputedly committed many harmful acts (*vehementer diffamata est et erat de multis maleficiis et nephandis*). Because it could not be proved that she had summoned help from the Devil, she only had to take an oath of cleansing. A similar case was that of Oetzschina, also denounced toward the end of the second trial. She believed neither in purgatory nor in revenants. She defended Waldensian preachers from accusations that they "kissed the cat beneath its tail" (*osculantur catum sub cauda*), and that they were preachers of the Devil (*predicadores diaboli*). In both cases, the accused had to be released. However, in 1442, Itha Stucki was caught up in the first witch hunt conducted by the city of Freiburg itself, without first consulting the inquisitor, and she was sentenced to burning at the stake, along with her son Peter. The heresy trials in Freiburg and surrounding areas thus turned seamlessly into witchcraft trials in the 1430s.

In Dauphiné, where witch hunts began slightly earlier (1424–1428) than in western Switzerland, persecution was aimed at both witches and Waldensians throughout the fifteenth century. In this region, secular judges tried the witches, while the Inquisition tried the Waldensians (Paravy 1993). Meanwhile, in western Switzerland, Waldensian hunts were almost completely replaced by witch hunts. In the later 1430s, the Inquisition in western Switzerland (still led by Ulric de Torrenté) also conducted witchcraft trials at Dommartin in 1438 and at Neuchatel in 1439 (Andenmatten and Utz Tremp 1992, 93f., 95–97, 110–118).

Practice followed theory almost immediately; the first five theoretical texts describing the witches' sect were created in the western Alps between 1428 and 1442 (Osterero et al. 1999). In western Switzerland, the Inquisition conducted its first small-scale witch hunt at Vevey in 1448 (*CLHM* 15), repeated in the same place on a larger scale thirty years later (*CLHM* 17). Significantly, the witches of Vevey in 1448 were described as "modern Waldensian heretics" (*heretici moderni Valdensium*); apparently, there and only there was any need felt to distinguish witches from Waldensians. Around

1460, the bishop of Lausanne, Georges de Saluces (Saluzzo), had witches arrested and executed in his own territory (*CLHM* 25). In 1498, the chapter followed suit in its village of Dommartin, where a male witch had previously been executed in 1438 (*CLHM* 17). In this case and in a further witch hunt conducted in the same area from 1524 to 1528 (*CLHM* 1), the heretical elements (inauguration into the sect, nighttime gatherings, and the sect's organization) took a backseat to magical elements, particularly *maleficia*. The heretical tradition receded in favor of the magical tradition, which would have been both more apparent and more important in village society.

The heretical substrate nonetheless decidedly influenced the first witch hunts. If we examine present-day French Switzerland at the end of the Middle Ages, we can conclude that, wherever heretics had been persecuted by an established inquisition, heretical elements surfaced quite frequently in early witchcraft accusations and confessions, and men were frequently prosecuted as witches, while *maleficium* (harmful magic) dominated in rural regions with no previous experience of inquisitorial persecution aimed at heretics. This knowledge makes the contrast between western and eastern Switzerland (especially Lucerne and its environs) especially significant, as does the contrast between early witchcraft trials in northwestern Switzerland and those in Val Leventina (Canton Ticino, Switzerland), shaped by northern Italian inquisitors (Modestin and Utz Tresp 2002).

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See also:

[conrad of marburg](#); [dauphiné](#); [errores qazariorum](#); [qui, bernard](#); [historiography](#); [inquisition, medieval](#); [john xxii, pope](#); [lausanne, diocese of](#); [manicheanism](#); [origins of the witch hunts](#); [savoy, duchy of](#); [switzerland](#); [torrenté, ulric de](#); [vaudois \(waldensians\)](#); [witch hunts](#).

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