

Summary of The Witch Craze

The witch craze was a complex, multifaceted phenomenon driven by religious, social, and political factors. While it peaked in the 16th and 17th centuries, its legacy endures in modern discussions about justice, gender, and the power dynamics within society. The witch hunts serve as a poignant reminder of the dangers of unchecked fear, superstition, and the persecution of marginalized groups.

Early Roots and Precedents (Before 1400)

Circa 1000–1300 **Early Christian Church and Witchcraft Beliefs** – The early Christian Church often associated pagan practices with heresy but did not widely persecute alleged witches. However, beliefs in magic and witchcraft persisted in local folklore across Europe.

1233 **Pope Gregory IX Establishes the Papal Inquisition** – The Inquisition was initially focused on rooting out heresy, particularly among the Cathars and Waldensians. Although not originally focused on witchcraft, it laid the groundwork for later witch trials.

1326 **Pope John XXII Issues the Bull Super Illius Specula** – This papal bull marks one of the earliest official mentions of witchcraft as a heresy, stating that witches are a threat to the Church and society. This papal endorsement begins to frame witchcraft as a significant religious crime.

Circa 1300–1400 **Medieval Legal Codes** – Various European legal codes begin to criminalize witchcraft, including the *Sachsenspiegel* (Germany) and *Liber Augustalis* (Sicily). However, cases of witchcraft persecution remain relatively rare and localized during this period.

The Dawn of the Witch Craze (1400–1500)

1427–1447 **Valais Witch Trials (Switzerland)** – One of the first large-scale witch trials in Europe occurs in the Valais region. Approximately 300 people are accused of witchcraft, with many executed. These trials set a precedent for later persecutions across Europe.

1431 **Execution of Joan of Arc** – Joan of Arc is burned at the stake by English forces after being accused of witchcraft and heresy. Her trial and execution reflect the merging of political, religious, and witchcraft accusations.

1484 **Pope Innocent VIII's Bull Summis desiderantes affectibus** – This papal bull explicitly acknowledges the existence of witchcraft and endorses the persecution of witches. It empowers inquisitors Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger to intensify witch hunts in Germany and elsewhere.

1486 **Publication of Malleus Maleficarum** – Written by Heinrich Kramer (and possibly Jacob Sprenger), this infamous manual, also known as *The Hammer of Witches*, becomes the most influential text on witch-hunting. It outlines methods for identifying, interrogating, and executing witches, and perpetuates many misogynistic views linking women with witchcraft.

The Dawn of the Witch Craze (1400–1500) (cont)

1490s **Witch Hunts in Northern Italy** – Witch trials begin to escalate in northern Italy, including Milan and Venice. The *Malleus Maleficarum* influences these early hunts, which target both men and women accused of witchcraft.

The Height of the Witch Craze (1500–1650)

1517 **Martin Luther's 95 Theses and the Protestant Reformation** – Martin Luther's challenge to the Catholic Church leads to the Protestant Reformation. This religious upheaval contributes to an environment of fear, suspicion, and demonization of the "other," intensifying witch hunts in both Protestant and Catholic regions.

1520s–1530s **Early Witch Trials in Germany** – Witch hunts spread across the Holy Roman Empire, particularly in Germany, where the Reformation exacerbates religious tensions. Trials during this period are often brutal, with torture commonly used to extract confessions.

1542 **The English Witchcraft Act of 1542** – King Henry VIII enacts England's first law specifically against witchcraft, making it a capital offense. This act marks the beginning of official witch persecution in England.



By RainyMoons (RainyMoons)

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The Height of the Witch Craze (1500–1650) (cont)

1560s- **Witch Hunts in France and Scotland** – Large-scale witch hunts begin in France and Scotland. Notably, the Basque Witch Trials in France and the North Berwick witch trials in Scotland lead to widespread panic and numerous executions.

1580- **Peak of the European Witch Craze** – This period sees the most intense witch hunts in Europe. Thousands of people, predominantly women, are accused of witchcraft and executed. The hunts are particularly severe in Germany, Switzerland, France, and Scotland.

1589 **North Berwick Witch Trials (Scotland)** – King James VI of Scotland (later James I of England) becomes directly involved in the trials of suspected witches, fueling the hysteria. His subsequent writings on witchcraft, particularly *Daemonologie* (1597), influence future witch hunts.

1590s **Witch Trials in the Holy Roman Empire** – The witch craze reaches its peak in Germany, with the notorious Würzburg and Bamberg witch trials. These trials see the execution of hundreds, including children, and are among the deadliest in European history.

The Height of the Witch Craze (1500–1650) (cont)

1604 **English Witchcraft Act of 1604** – Under James I, England enacts a new, harsher Witchcraft Act, which reinforces the death penalty for witchcraft and leads to an increase in trials and executions.

1612 **Pendle Witch Trials (England)** – One of the most famous witch trials in England occurs in Pendle, Lancashire. Twelve people are accused of witchcraft; ten are found guilty and executed. The trial is well-documented and has become emblematic of the English witch hunts.

1617- **Witch Hunts in the Holy Roman Empire** – The Würzburg and Bamberg witch trials intensify, with hundreds of people, including children and clergy, accused of witchcraft. These trials are marked by extreme brutality and widespread use of torture.

1634 **Loudun Possessions and Witch Trials (France)** – The Ursuline nuns of Loudun claim to be possessed by demons, leading to the trial and execution of a local priest, Urbain Grandier, for witchcraft. The case is notable for its political and sexual undertones.

The Height of the Witch Craze (1500–1650) (cont)

1645- **English Civil War and the Matthew Hopkins Witch Hunts** – During the English Civil War, witch hunts spike, particularly in East Anglia. Matthew Hopkins, self-styled as the “Witchfinder General,” leads a campaign resulting in the execution of around 300 alleged witches. His methods, including sleep deprivation and torture, are controversial even at the time.

Decline of the Witch Craze (1650–1750)

1650s- **Shift in Intellectual Thought** – The Enlightenment begins to influence European intellectual circles, promoting rationalism and skepticism. As scientific understanding grows, belief in witchcraft and demonic possession begins to wane, contributing to the decline of witch hunts.

1662 **The Bideford Witch Trial (England)** – One of the last significant witch trials in England occurs in Bideford, Devon. Three women are hanged for witchcraft, but growing public skepticism about such trials is evident.

1663 **The Würzburg Trials End** – The Würzburg witch trials, which began in 1626, finally come to an end, having claimed the lives of around 900 people. This marks the decline of large-scale witch hunts in Germany.



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Decline of the Witch Craze (1650–1750) (cont)

1682 **The Last Witch Execution in England** – Temperance Lloyd is executed in Exeter, Devon, for witchcraft. She is the last person executed for witchcraft in England.

1692-1693 **Salem Witch Trials (Colonial America)** – One of the most famous witch trials in history occurs in Salem, Massachusetts. Twenty people are executed, and several others die in prison. The trials are fueled by religious extremism, social tensions, and mass hysteria. The aftermath leads to widespread remorse and skepticism about the validity of witch trials.

1697 **Swedish Witch Trials End** – The Torsåker witch trials in Sweden, which began in the 1670s, come to an end. Over 70 people were executed during these trials, marking one of the last large-scale witch hunts in Europe.

1712 **Jane Wenham's Trial (England)** – Jane Wenham is tried for witchcraft in Hertfordshire. Although convicted, she is later pardoned by the Queen, signaling the end of witch trials in England.

1727 **Last Witch Execution in Scotland** – Janet Horne is executed for witchcraft in Dornoch, Scotland. Her execution is widely considered the last in the British Isles.

Decline of the Witch Craze (1650–1750) (cont)

1736 **The Witchcraft Act of 1736 (Britain)** – The British Parliament repeals the Witchcraft Act of 1604, effectively ending the legal persecution of witches. The new act punishes those who claim to have magical powers, shifting the focus from witch-hunting to the punishment of fraudulent claims.

1745 **The Last Execution for Witchcraft in Germany** – Anna Schnidenwind is executed in Emden, marking one of the last witch executions in Germany.

1782 **Last Legal Execution for Witchcraft in Europe** – Anna Göldi, often considered the “last witch,” is executed in Glarus, Switzerland. Her case is later recognized as a miscarriage of justice, reflecting the changing attitudes towards witchcraft and persecution.

Modern Reflections and Legacy (1800–Present)

1800s **Historians Reevaluate the Witch Craze** – With the rise of modern historiography, scholars begin to critically examine the witch hunts. Early works, such as those by Charles Mackay (*Memheoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*), begin to demystify the hysteria and explore its social, religious, and psychological roots.

Modern Reflections and Legacy (1800–Present) (cont)

1920s-1930s **Rise of Neo-Pagan Movements** – The 20th century sees the emergence of neo-pagan movements, such as Wicca, which reframe witchcraft in a positive light. These movements challenge the historical narrative of witches as evil and seek to reclaim and celebrate pre-Christian traditions.

1951 **Repeal of the Witchcraft Act in the UK** – The British Parliament repeals the Witchcraft Act of 1736, recognizing that beliefs in witchcraft no longer hold legal or social power. This marks the formal end of legal repercussions related to witchcraft in the UK.

1980s-1990s **Historians and Feminists Reinterpret the Witch Craze** – Scholars, particularly feminist historians like Anne Llewellyn Barstow and Silvia Federici, analyze the witch craze as a form of social control over women, linking it to broader patterns of misogyny and patriarchal oppression.

2000s **Apologies and Memorials** – Various governments and institutions begin to issue formal apologies for the witch trials. For example, in 2001, the Scottish Parliament issues an apology for the country's role in witch persecution. Memorials are erected in several places to honor the victims of the witch hunts.



By RainyMoons (RainyMoons)

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Modern Reflections and Legacy (1800–Present) (cont)

Present **Continued Interest and Representation in Popular Culture** – The witch craze remains a subject of significant interest in literature, film, and television, often serving as a metaphor for broader themes of persecution, fear, and the dangers of mass hysteria.



By **RainyMoons** (RainyMoons)

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