

## **Witch Hunts in the XV-XVII centuries, with a focus on the Reformation and CounterReformation of the Church as well as the areas of England and Scotland.**

The Witch Hunts and the Witch trials that followed them were a phenomenon spread throughout Europe, originating in Germany as a direct result of *Malleus Maleficarum* written by Jacob Sprenger and Henrich Kraemer as well as enthusiastic work of Henry Institoris, a work that was a pinnacle of their devout longing to eradicate anything they deemed as the enemy of the faith. The Catholic abomination of witch hunts took root early on and was eagerly adopted by various groups and countries, reaching as far as Protestant England and Scotland, where being Catholic was the same as being a witch or a heretic in Europe plagued by the Catholic Church. To implement Catholic ideology without resorting to the Catholic means, King James I wrote *Demonology*, which dealt with the same issues as Sprenger's and Kraemer's *Malleus*. It was the Reformation's version of the Witch Hunter's guidebook and their way of following in their Catholic brethren's footsteps, as well as an excuse to eradicate them.

Torture was nothing new in Britain in the 12th century included the following in case of a presumed murder:

If he deny the deed, and be taken red-handed or in pursuit, or the deed be notorious among the people of the parish, it is proper that he submit to inquiry and the proof by witnesses... and if it cannot be completely proved, and common report or strong presumptions are found against him, he should have ordeal, or torture, three times.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, considering that being a Catholic was equal to treason against the crown, similar to being caught practising witchcraft in Scotland or England, it is no surprise that the idea of torture came easily to the people of the British Isles. After all, not only served it as a way of cleansing the earth, it also served as an interesting entertainment for the audience that would gather during these trials and subsequent executions.

Particularly interesting in this situation is the figure of Matthew Hopkins and his treatise, *The Discovery Of Witches* as well as his famous witch swimming. Matthew Hopkins was an English witch-hunter born c. 1620. His treatise describes various ways someone can gain a confession from a witch. They gradually progress in variety and severity but skillfully mix psychological and physical torment. In his *Discovery*, Hopkins often justifies his torture as not being torture but either a choice made by the witch (Quer.8)<sup>2</sup> or simply a way for those watching them to protect themselves (Quer. 9)<sup>3</sup>. He tends to attempt to absolve himself from any misdeeds. He further describes the drownings and hanging of the witches. He attempts to portray the drownings as a way of pushing a witch to present herself. He justifies, using King James I's *Demonology* as justification for drowning, who, in his book, draws a connection between The Trial by Water and the Baptism, saying that as a witch has to deny her baptism, the water, which is used during the ceremony, would not accept a witch and expel her towards the dry land. Therefore it is a useful tool in discovering whether someone is a witch.<sup>4</sup> It is further justified by him that water has other ways of showing guilt and

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1 Brian Innes, *The History Of Torture*, (London, Amber Books Ltd, 2012)  
<<https://www.scribd.com/read/440090354/The-History-of-Torture>> [Accessed 18 August 2023] p.30.

2 Matthew Hopkins, *The Discovery Of Witches*, (N.A: The Project Gutenberg, 2004)  
<<https://www.scribd.com/read/187115071/The-Discovery-of-Witches>> [Accessed 18 August 2023] p.24.

3 Matthew Hopkins, *The Discovery Of Witches*, p.26.

4 Ibid.,p. 28.

gives an example of witches accusing someone of making debasing comments towards them, which they retell with tears freely flowing. This, he counters, is not present during witch trials, as their eyes remain dry.<sup>5</sup>

It is surprising to see the lengths Hopkins goes to clear himself of any wrongdoing, intelligently elucidating that his conscience would not allow him to fabricate a confession or accept one made under the duress of torture, with the exception of what he calls swimming or walking, as these in his minds are not tortures.<sup>6</sup>

The questions supposedly posed to him, which he includes in his treatise, shed more light on the true nature of his actions than the answer he provides. Even though he attempts to explain his actions in an elaborate manner, this serves no real insight into the true nature of his actions and only serves to show either his lack of self-awareness or his ability to manipulate the perception of others. It is further nothing but a stain against the memory of his victims. The majority of evidence he mentions is what would amount to birthmarks or haemorrhoids.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, he attributes the witches' power to Satan, 'The Divells speech to the Witches.'<sup>8</sup>

A similar fate to the Witches and Catholics in England met the Jews in Spain. In *The History Of Torture*, Brian Innes mentions that Inquisition in Spain was known for its vicious reputation, yet it developed quite late compared to the rest of Europe.<sup>9</sup> The Inquisition there started with 'the need for religious unity within the kingdom',<sup>10</sup> Initially, the Jews were simply unpleasant addition to the Kingdom, but towards the end of the fourteenth century. The crown proceeded to put pressure on the Jews to either convert to the Catholic faith or die. There were those who succumbed to the pressure and converted, upholding their faith in secret, something that earned them the name of 'filthy swine',<sup>11</sup> and served to further aggravate the crown to the point of persuading Pope Sixtus IV in 1478 to

[...]issue a bull that authorized the Catholic kings to name the inquisitors they wished to be appointed. This was intended to be an alliance of Church and State, but in reality resulted in a strengthening of the absolute power of the throne.<sup>12</sup>

The inquisition in Spain had a more extensive list of potential sins to question people about, these included 'heresy and apostasy, but also witchcraft, bigamy, blasphemy, and usury',<sup>13</sup> they were also permitted to use torture to achieve desired results.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps luckily, the Jews were offered a bit of reprieve in 1492, when they were offered to either convert or be banished, resulting in over 160 thousand leaving Spain.<sup>15</sup> Those who decided to convert were not saved from the Inquisition's wrath and, subsequently, their burning stakes.

Regarding the Judges, Innes quotes a lawyer J. Damgouder, who proceeds to describe a typical torture

[...]stripped naked and laid on a straight bench, his hands tied behind his back, his belly in the air.[...] He is tied down to the bench,[...] His two big toes are tied to a cord, which stretches his

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.,p.28.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.,p.31.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.,p.18.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.,p.36.

<sup>9</sup> Brian Innes, *The History Of Torture*, p. 69.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.,p.69.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.,p.69.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.,p.69.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.,p.69.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.,p.69.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.,p.69.

body by means of a wheel, a stick or similar instrument. Afterward, another cord may be tied above the knee round his thighs, which can be tightened, more or less, at the discretion of the judge. [...] Then **the executioner** may place a clean cloth over the sufferer's eyes and, forcing his nostrils closed with it, pours a jar over his diaphragm, [...] and elsewhere, and then, forcing open his mouth with a small bridle, pours in cold water, until he swells up to the point where the judge and his council consider he can no longer endure it[...]<sup>16</sup>

This is further continued with a description of a 'good judge'<sup>17</sup> that 'The good judge is always compassionate'<sup>18</sup> and that he must uphold the good name of his office.<sup>19</sup> Inness, in a somehow pleasantly condescending manner, criticises this attitude of a 'good judge' by wondering what tortures then awaited those at the hands of less kind judges who did not avoid causing 'unnecessary harm' and further asks a question what this could mean, if 'undue distress' meant that the accused was already progressively lawfully torn apart.<sup>20</sup>

Regardless of the scope of the Spanish Inquisition, the use of torture and the vast tools that were developed specifically for it, such as the Witch's bridle and Witch's Needle, were as much torture devices as they were means of causing hysteria. The psychological impact they had on people who bore witness to the events was enough to spread fear and ensure that the potential witches either sought shelter or offered themselves willingly in hopes of avoiding such a tragic fate. This, in turn, resulted in many devices, fuelled by the hysteric imagination, to be turned into tales, never to be used in reality, but to serve as a scare tactic, as fear is often worse than reality itself.

The Medieval works such as *The Malleus Maleficarum*, *The Discovery of Witches* and *Demonology* caused undue pain and suffering for hundreds of thousands of people, forcing many to seek shelter from torture and hatred, oftentimes having done none of what they may have been accused of. Such a socio-political impact can rarely be accredited to have originated from a few pieces of writing as the witch hunts can and even fewer with such a bloodied result. People nowadays can not hope to comprehend the fear people back then felt, oftentimes trying their best not to wrong anyone as they could end up at stake for it. Such a fear lowered their quality of already poor life and prevented them from enjoying it whilst it lasted. Potentially, with the fear hanging over their heads and many innocent people being murdered for the sins they did not commit, many sought to commit the very crimes others were forced to confess to. Many others, such as herbalists, feared to use their knowledge to help others, even though, in those days, there was often no other way to help with illness but to seek someone who knew how to create herbal concoctions, thus decreasing the already low chances of survival.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.,pp.72-74

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.,p. 74

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.,p. 74

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.,p. 74

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.,p.74

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