

# Witches

*The Shadowy Truth*  
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*Gothic fashion  
designer Kambriel  
models traditional  
bewitching attire  
from Salem.*

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*Secrets of the ancient craft have been shrouded in mystery and controversy for centuries. Accused of practicing the black arts, witches were eradicated en masse and driven underground during Medieval times, only to resurface in the modern day as a force to be reckoned with.*

Cast as the wicked villains of fairy tales and folklore, witches have been depicted as ugly old crones wearing pointed black hats, who churn bubbling cauldrons and fly across the night sky on broomsticks. Some of these stereotypical attributes do have their individual basis in fact, though the truth is nowhere near the sinister depictions found in fables. During the Middle Ages, books and the ability to read were quite uncommon, and the knowledge garnered during one's lifetime was passed down from generation to generation, therefore it stood to reason that the older one was, the more wisdom they possessed. The word "witch" was derived from the Old English word "wicca," meaning wise, and traditionally referred to the oldest members of a village or clan. The wiccan elders possessed knowledge concerning such things as what to do to ensure a bountiful harvest, as well as herbal remedies for common ailments and medical conditions. These herbal concoctions were often brewed in a large boiling cauldron.

Tall, pointed black hats, which were a common style in some parts of Europe during the Middle Ages, were condemned by the Church as representing the horn of the Devil. It is also believed that early Wiccans concealed their ritual staffs as brooms to avoid detection during the times of the witch hunts, though somehow it came to be believed that witches could fly on their broomsticks during the 'witching hour' which lasted from Midnight till 1AM.

Fairy tales such as "Hansel and Gretel" portray witches as old hags who devour small children. The similar themes of "Snow White" and "Sleeping Beauty" centered around evil witches as well. And though the film *The Wizard of Oz* depicted the witch of the north as being angelically beautiful and kind, it

was the ugly and wicked witch of the west that left audiences with a much more lasting impression. To understand exactly how witches gained such a bad reputation, we must leaf through the pages of history.

#### **HISTORY AND PRACTICE**

The practice of witchcraft has been widely recorded throughout the ages. The ancient Druids of England were believed to practice a dark form of Earth magic, and the Magi of ancient Egypt were sorcerers who were said to have had the power to raise and commune with the dead. Witches were believed to possess many supernatural abilities including creating charms of protection and love, casting spells for benevolent purposes as well as the occasional hex, and being able to foresee the future. Witches learned their craft from spellbooks known as grimoires, which were handed down from generation to generation. Witch's covens, comprised of thirteen members were said to meet at Sabbaths, ceremonial nighttime rituals to honor their pagan deities and celebrate seasonal events.

#### **A SINISTER TAINT**

In the Dark Ages, it was not uncommon for people to seek the aid of the local witch. Even kings were known to consult witches to learn the outcome of future events. However, by Medieval times witchcraft had received a sinister taint and witches were persecuted for their practices and beliefs. As Christianity swept through Europe, the Christian doctrine allowed no religious freedoms and deemed the pagan religions of the Old World to be evil. Any powers or abilities that originated outside of the Christian faith were considered to be blasphemous and to have been gained

from a sacrilegious alliance with the Christian nemesis, Satan. The pentagram, a sacred pagan symbol was deemed to be a sign of Satan. Anyone thought to be a witch was accused of being in league with dark powers and making pacts with the Devil. Contrary to these charges, the pagan religions did not even believe in the Christian concept of the Devil.

In 906AD, the Roman Catholic church condemned witchcraft and set out to eradicate it. Suspected witches were arrested and accused of conjuring the Devil at their Sabbaths and signing pacts with him, selling their souls in exchange for magical powers. The Devil was also said to bestow witches with magical helpers known as familiars. These creatures usually took the form of a common animal such as a cat or crow and aided the witch with certain spells. Witches were also believed to have the power to shapeshift and take on the form of other people or animals. By 1233, the threat of witchcraft was considered to be so severe that Pope Gregory IX deemed it necessary to take drastic and brutal measures and founded the first Inquisition.

#### **WITCH HUNTS**

Perhaps the most frightening and dreaded aspect of the Middle Ages were the witch hunts of the Inquisition. This dark and bloody reign of terror was sanctioned by the Catholic church and enforced by the local ruling authorities. With official titles such as Witchfinder General and Grand Inquisitor, the Inquisition acted above the law to arrest and interrogate witches.

The motivations of the witchfinders were usually far from religious. Many times the accusers stood to gain something by the death of the accused.

Innocent people were named as witches for a variety of unrelated reasons such as revenge, scorned love, or as a means to confiscate their wealth and land. In 1486, a book entitled *Malleus Maleficarum* (*A Hammer to Strike Witches*) condemned witches and women in general as the instruments of carnal lust. *Malleus Maleficarum* became the handbook for witch hunters in Europe, instructing them as to how best recognize and deal with the menace of witchcraft.

Once accused of witchcraft, there was virtually no hope for a pleasant outcome. Suspected witches were imprisoned, interrogated and tortured until they confessed to being in league with dark powers. Those who confessed immediately, with the hope of sparing themselves the pain of torture, were tortured anyway to ensure that they were not giving a false confession. Many people were tortured until they named other innocent people as their conspirators. These people were in turn brought in for interrogation, continuing the sadistic cycle of suffering and death.

Those who did not admit to guilt were burned alive, while those who signed a written confession were 'humanely' strangled to death first. In the case of the Aberdeen witches of Scotland in 1597, twenty-four people who were found guilty of practicing witchcraft were hanged and burned, while other suspects who were not proven guilty had their faces branded and were banished from the village.

Throughout Medieval Europe, hundreds of thousands of convicted witches were stoned to death, drowned, hanged and burned at the stake. Entire villages were put to the torch during a period that came to be known as "the burning times." The Inquisition held Europe in its bloody grip, and it seemed that no one was above the reach of the madness that prevailed. The Knights Templar, a sect of religious protectors, were accused of worshipping the horned devil Baphomet and summarily sentenced to death for heresy. Another religious warrior, Joan of Arc, was convicted of heresy as well. Both she and the Templars were burned at the stake, however, years after their deaths the Templars were admonished of any wrong doings and Joan of Arc was made a Saint

by the Catholic Church.

The hysteria of the European witch hunts made its way to the shores of America in 1692 when the now infamous Salem witch trials were conducted in Salem, Massachusetts. A total of 141 people were arrested, interrogated and imprisoned for the charges of witchcraft, and by the time it had ended 20 people were hanged on Gallows Hill.

### THE BLACK ARTS

Though witches were accused of practicing black magic, there is very little evidence to support the validity of such charges. In fact, it would appear that the formation of devil worshipping cults was a direct result of the witch hunts as a form of rebellion against the moral authority. However, if the testimonials given under the duress of torture are to be believed, there did exist a realm of sorcery known as black magic.



Practitioners of black magic are said to obtain their powers from Satan and other demonic forces. This is also referred to as following 'the Left-Hand Path,' representing the reversal of that which is deemed normal. The pentagram, a sacred symbol of white magic, is inverted in black magic to depict the sign of the goat-horned devil Baphomet.

Spells from the Black Books included magical recipes for 'working woe' or inflicting harm. One such spell known as 'burying the sheaf' was a precursor to the voodoo doll. According to this spell, a witch could bring about the death of an enemy by fashioning a human likeness from wheat stalks. After reciting an incantation in a church with your back to the altar, the sheaf effigy was to be pierced with pins and buried in the

ground. As the sheaf began to decay, so too would the health of the intended victim. Other spells instructed sorcerers how to conjure impish servants such as a homonculus or mandragora to do their bidding.

A strange contradiction of beliefs can be found in several of the European grimoires. Many of these magical textbooks actually require prayer to call forth the powers of God to cause harm and death. The *Grimoire of Honorius*, dating from the 17th century, purports to have been written by a pope and instructs that the magician who uses it should also be a priest. One of the spells requires a Christian Mass and invokes the powers of God in order to summon up the Devil. With all the contradiction and confusion of ideas surrounding witchcraft, it is easy to understand why scholars and historians continue to debate its existence to this day.

### THE MODERN WICCAN

Today, Wicca is accepted as a legitimate and bonafide pagan religion of nature lovers who have returned to the old ways. These practitioners of white magic worship the Earth Goddess, weaving spells from sacred circles and wearing pentagrams as a symbol of their faith. Candles, crystals, oils and incense have replaced eye of newt and tongue of toad as essential ingredients for weaving a successful charm. Casting spells for evil purposes or to cause harm is against the Wiccan belief. In fact many Wiccans believe that the negative energy of a harmful spell will return unto its caster to inflict three times the ill effects of the original spell.

Modern day Salem has become a Mecca for witches, with a Wiccan population estimated to be over 5000. Ritual ceremonies are held on Gallows Hill to commemorate those who died there, even though it is unlikely that any of them were actually witches. Even in the 21st century, misconceptions about witchcraft are still rampant. Black and white magic is still lumped together by the general public, and witches continue to be feared as frightening and evil creatures. Perhaps some of their sinister stereotypes have been deserved through the ages, but there is a clear and undeniable distinction between the powers of light and darkness in the modern day.