

The cumulative concept of witchcraft

The cumulative concept of witchcraft refers to the idea that the concept of the 'witch' built up over a long period of time and came from many sources, in order to form what eventually came to be the common picture of the witch (old woman, pact with the Devil, etc.).

The 'witches'

- The standard stereotype of a witch was a quarrelsome woman who exercised magical power by harming her neighbours. Both men and women quarrelled, but only a woman's quarrelsomeness was ever taken as evidence of witchcraft. Presumably this was because men were considered to have other recourses for vengeance, such as physical violence or legal proceedings.
- Approximately 80% of European 'witches' were female. However, this varied according to country and region. For example, 93% of those accused of witchcraft in Essex were female, whereas women made up only 8% of those accused in Iceland, and only 32% of those accused in Russia.
- Usually, more men than women were condemned as witches when:
 - heretical religious beliefs were linked to witchcraft
 - witchcraft, allegedly, was invoked for purposes of political gain
 - hunts took place in areas with a tradition of male magic
 - witch-hunts got out of control and people were named as witches indiscriminately.
- The idea that witches tended to be women was related to the idea that witches tended to be widows.
- The idea that witches were old women possibly related to beliefs about menstruation and the menopause. Menstruation was seen as the body's way of ridding itself of impurities, so it was believed that, after the menopause, these impurities built up in the body, making an older woman into a cocktail of dangerous fluids. Also, patriarchal assumptions about women included the idea that their function was to bear children, so a post-menopausal woman no longer had a use.
- The idea that witches were widows probably stems from the patriarchal belief that 'normal' women were married; marriage was their natural, indeed virtually their only, social role.
- A husband was expected to defend his wife if she was accused of witchcraft, but widows and spinsters had nobody to defend them, and so were more vulnerable to witchcraft accusations.
- Please keep in mind that the stereotype of the witch does not necessarily correspond with the types of people that were actually accused and found guilty of witchcraft.

The Devil

- Until the late medieval period, the Devil was depicted as looking similar to Jesus, often being blue in colour.
- As time went on, the concept of the Devil changed to incorporate both Christian and Pagan beliefs. It became more common for the Devil to be depicted as

black, because black is the colour of sin. Also, the Devil took on elements of Pagan gods (particularly Pan), such as horns, a tail and cloven hooves.

- The Reformation helped to 'promote' the Devil to being the 'Anti-God', rather than the 'Antichrist'. This is because Protestantism focused on the Ten Commandments, rather than the Seven Deadly Sins, and the first Commandment is 'You shall have no other gods but me'. As a result, witches began to be viewed as Devil worshippers, which was now considered a worse crime than maleficium.
- The central idea in the cumulative concept of witchcraft is that witches made pacts with the Devil.
- The pact served as the main link between the practice of maleficium and the alleged worship of the Devil.
- In the earliest accounts of pacts with the Devil, the human party made an agreement resembling a legal contract according to which the Devil provided wealth or some other form of earthly power in exchange for service and the custody of the human party's soul after death.
- Initially, it was magicians (almost exclusively male), not witches, that were believed to make pacts with the Devil. Crucially, these pacts were believed to be initiated by the magician and to place the Devil at the magician's service. The negotiation of the pact was believed to be conducted by two equals, each trying to outwit the other.
- However, over time beliefs about the pact changed, and it became witches (often ignorant peasants), rather than educated magicians, that made pacts with the Devil. In these cases it was usually believed that the witch had succumbed to the temptations of the Devil, rather than that the witch had summoned the Devil. It was also believed that the Devil had the upper hand in the arrangement, rather than being under the control of the witch.
- The Devil was often believed to give the witch and 'witch's mark', which could look like a birthmark, or be a part of the skin that was impervious to pain.

The sabbat (sometimes referred to as the sabbath)

- Sabbats were believed to be gatherings of witches, usually with the Devil in attendance.
- Belief in the sabbat was not as widespread as belief in the pact with the Devil (it is hardly mentioned in the *Malleus*, for example), but it was still highly influential in many areas.
- Belief in the sabbat was much more common amongst the elite than the lower classes.
- However, as more and more 'witches' were encouraged to confess to attending sabbats, the concept spread and more lower class people began to hear of them.
- Some of the most common beliefs about sabbats were that they involved naked dancing, cannibalistic infanticide and sexual intercourse with the Devil.
- Many beliefs about sabbats originated from beliefs regarding occurrences at meetings of heretics.
- In some instances it was believed that witches attended sabbats in spirit only.
- Belief in the sabbat added to the idea that witches did not work alone.

Transvection

- Transvection is the art of magical flight (e.g. on a broomstick).
- Witches were believed to travel to sabbats by the means of transvection.
- Witches were believed to transvect a range of things, such as broomsticks, men, animals and even unbroken eggshells.
- Belief in the transvection of witches can be traced back to Ancient Roman beliefs that the goddess Diana's followers, mainly female sorcerers, reached their meetings on the backs of bewitched animals and men. Another belief from classical times was that of the *strigae* - women who metamorphosed into screech owls at night with a view to devouring infants. It is known that versions of these beliefs were a widespread element in the folklore of medieval Germany, France and Italy.
- Until the 14th century, the official line was that such ideas were imagined and, at worst, satanic illusions. By the 15th century, however, demonologists were beginning to promote the idea that transvection was a genuine and diabolical phenomenon, and this was becoming widely accepted by many among Europe's elite.