Modern European History

Unit 2 – Crusades and Culture in the Middle Ages

Medieval Sourcebook: Witchcraft Documents [15th Century]

**Directions:**

**Read and annotate the following text.**

*The really intense period of persecution of witches did not come until the late 16th and 17th centuries. The basic doctrines of the later witchcraze were laid down in documents of the later medieval period. These documents built on longstanding folk beliefs which were put in vaguely academic dress.*

*There has been much recent discussion of whether witches actually existed. For a long period the whole discussion was seen as a mirror of psychological anxieties. Some recent authors - notably Carlo Ginzberg - however, have argued that there were indeed groups of people who regarded themselves as witches. This whole issue is still under discussion.*

*Real or not, witches and witchcraft, were very real phenomena to the writers of the fifteenth century and later. Their writing tell us much about their thought worlds, and also their attitudes towards women. There can be no doubt that, whether of not there were real groups of witches, many women and a few men, suffered intense persecution and death as a result of intolerance. As Arthur Miller showed in his play****The Crucible****, set in Massachusetts at the time of the Salem witch trials but about McCarthyism, irrational prejudice and state action based on such, is hardly a medieval, or even a religious, phenomenon.*

*The three documents below include the Papal Bull of 1484, in which the pope provided his blessing and encouragement to witchhunting; an account of some beliefs about witches; and an extract from the Hammer of Witches describing the process of examination and trial. If the twists and turns to produce a confession were not so tragic, they would constitute humor worthy of Kafka.*

## Innocent VIII: BULL *Summis desiderantes*, Dec. 5th, 1484

*Bullarium Romanum (Taurinensis editio), sub, anno 1484. The Bull is also printed in full at the head of the*Malleus maleficarum.

Innocent, bishop, servant of the servants of God, *Ad futuram rei memoriam*

Desiring with supreme ardor, as pastoral solicitude requires, that the catholic faith in our days everywhere grow and flourish as much as possible, and that all heretical depravity be put far from the territories of the faithful, we freely declare and anew decree this by which our pious desire may be fulfilled, and, all errors being rooted out by our toil as with the hoe of a wise laborer, zeal and devotion to this faith may take deeper hold on the hearts of the faithful themselves.

It has recently come to our ears, not without great pain to us, that in some parts of upper Germany, as well as in the provinces, cities, territories, regions, and dioceses of Mainz, Ko1n, Trier, Salzburg, and Bremen, many persons of both sexes, heedless of their own salvation and forsaking the catholic faith, give themselves over to devils male and female, and by their incantations, charms, and conjurings, and by other abominable superstitions and sortileges, offences, crimes, and misdeeds, ruin and cause to perish the offspring of women, the foal of animals, the products of the earth, the grapes of vines, and the fruits of trees, as well as men and women, cattle and flocks and herds and animals of every kind, vineyards also and orchards, meadows, pastures, harvests, grains and other fruits of the earth; that they afflict and torture with dire pains and anguish, both internal and external, these men, women, cattle, flocks, herds, and animals, and hinder men from begetting and women from conceiving, and prevent all consummation of marriage; that, moreover, they deny with sacrilegious lips the faith they . received in holy baptism; and that, at the instigation of the enemy of mankind, they do not fear to commit and perpetrate many other abominable offences and crimes, at the risk of their own souls, to the insult of the divine majesty and to the pernicious example and scandal of multitudes. And, although our beloved sons Henricus Institoris and Jacobus Sprenger, of the order of Friars Preachers, professors of theology, have been and still are deputed by our apostolic letters as inquisitors of heretical pravity, the former in the aforesaid parts of upper Germany, including the provinces, cities, territories, dioceses, and other places as above, and the latter throughout certain parts of the course of the Rhine; nevertheless certain of the clergy and of the laity of those parts, seeking to be wise above what is fitting, because in the said letter of deputation the aforesaid provinces, cities, dioceses, territories, and other places, and the persons and offences in question were not individually and specifically named, do not blush obstinately to assert that these are not at all included in the said parts and that therefore it is illicit for the aforesaid inquisitors to exercise their office of inquisition in the provinces, cities, dioceses, territories, and other places aforesaid, and that they ought not to be permitted to proceed to the punishment, imprisonment, and correction of the aforesaid persons for the offences and crimes above named. Wherefore in the provinces, cities, dioceses territories, and places aforesaid such offences and crimes, not without evident damage to their souls and risk of eternal salvation, go unpunished.

We therefore, desiring, as is our duty, to remove all impediments by which in any way the said inquisitors are hindered in the exercise of their office, and to prevent the taint of heretical pravity and of other like evils from spreading their infection to the ruin of others who are innocent, the zeal of religion especially impelling us, in order that the provinces, cities, dioceses, territories, and places aforesaid in the said parts of upper Germany may not be deprived of the office of inquisition which is their due, do hereby decree, by virtue of our apostolic authority, that it shall be permitted to the said inquisitors in these regions to exercise their office of inquisition and to proceed to the correction, imprisonment, and punishment of the aforesaid persons for their said offences and crimes, in all respects and altogether precisely as if the provinces, cities, territories, places, persons, and offences aforesaid were expressly named in the said letter. And, for the greater sureness, extending the said letter and deputation to the provinces, cities, dioceses, territories, places, persons, and crimes aforesaid, we grant to the said inquisitors that they or either of them joining with them our beloved son Johannes Gremper, cleric of the diocese of Coonstance, master of arts, their present notary, or any other notary public who by them or by either of them shall have been temporarily delegated in the provinces, cities, dioceses, territories, and places aforesaid, may exercise against all persons, of whatsoever condition and rank, the said office of inquisition, correcting, imprisoning, punishing and chastising, according to their deserts, those persons whom they shall find guilty as aforesaid.

And they shall also have full and entire liberty to propound and preach to the faithful word of God, as often as it shall seem to them fitting and proper, in each and all of the parosh churches in the said provinces, and to do all things necessary and suitable under the aforesaid circumstances, and likewise freely and fully to carry them out.

## Johannes Nider, the ANT HILL, circa 1437

Nider, Formicarius, ed. of Augsburg, ca. 1476Lib. V. cap. 3

*This is one of the earliest books which thows light on the methods of persecution. Written by the Dominican scholar Johannes Nider, about 1436, the work consists of a dialogue between a theologian and a doubter on a variety of topics*

I will relate to you some examples, which I have gained in part from the teachers of our faculty, in part from the experience of a certain upright secular judge, worthy of all faith, who from the torture and confession of witches and from his experiences in public and private has learned many things of this sort-a man with whom I have often discussed this subject broadly and deeply-to wit, Peter, a citizen of Bern, in the diocese of Lausanne, [Note: this is Peter of Gruyeres, Bernese castellan 1392-1406] who has burned many witches of both sexes, and has driven others out of the territory of the Bernese. I have moreover conferred with one Benedict, a monk of the Benedictine order, who, although now a very devout cleric in a reformed monastery at Vienna, was a decade ago, while still in the world, a necromancer, juggler, buffoon, and strolling player, well-known as an expert among the secular nobility. I have likewise heard certain of the following things from the Inquisitor of Heretical Pravity [note: this was the official title of the represenative of the Inquistion] at Autun, who was a devoted reformer of our order in the convent at Lyons, and has convicted many of witchcraft in the diocese of Autun.

The same procedure was more clearly described by another young man, arrested and burned as a witch, although as I believe, truly, penitent, who had earlier, together with his wife, a witch invincible to persuasion, escaped the clutches of the aforesaid judge, Peter. The aforesaid youth, being again indicted at Bern, with his wife, and placed in a different prison from hers, declared: "If I can obtain absolution for my sins, I will freely lay bare all I know about witchcraft, for I see that I have death to expect." And when he had been assured by the scholars that, if he should truly repent, he would certainly be able to gain absolution for his sins, then he gladly offered himself to death, and disclosed the methods of the primeval infection.

The ceremony, he said, of my seduction was as follows: First, on a Sunday, before the holy water is consecrated, the future disciple with his masters must go into the church, and there in their presence must renounce Christ and his faith, baptism, and the church universal. Then he must do homage to the magisterulus, that is, to the little master (for so, and not otherwise, they call the Devil). Afterward he drinks from the aforesaid flask: and, this done, he forthwith feels himself to conceive and hold within himself an image of our art and the chief rites of this sect. After this fashion was I seduced; and my wife also, whom I believe of so great pertinacity that she will endure the flames rather than confess the least whit of the truth; but, alas, we are both guilty. What the young man had said was found in all respects the truth. For, after confession, the young man was seen to die in great contrition. His wife, however, though convicted by the testimony of witnesses, would not confess the truth even under the torture or in death; but when the fire was prepared for her by the executioner, uttered in most evil words a curse upon him, and so was burned.

## Extracts from THE HAMMER OF WITCHES [Malleus maleficarum], 1486

*Even with the papal bull the German inquisitors found their preparation incomplete. Soon after their return from Rome they set about compiling a handbook - an exposition of witchcraft and a code of procedure for detection and punishment of witches. Completed in 1486, it was called the*Hammer of Witches.

The method of beginning an examination by torture is as follows: First, the jailers prepare the implements of torture, then they strip the prisoner (if it be a woman, she has already been stripped by other women, upright and of good report). This stripping is lest some means of witchcraft may have been sewed into the clothing-such as often, taught by the Devil, they prepare from the bodies of unbaptized infants, [murdered] that they may forfeit salvation. And when the implements of torture have been prepared, the judge, both in person and through other good men zealous in the faith, tries to persuade the prisoner to confess the truth freely; but, if he will not confess, he bid attendants make the prisoner fast to the strappado or some other implement of torture. The attendants obey forthwith, yet with feigned agitation. Then, at the prayer of some of those present, the prisoner is loosed again and is taken aside and once more persuaded to confess, being led to believe that he will in that case not be put to death.

Here it may be asked whether the judge, in the case of a prisoner much defamed, convicted both by witnesses and by proofs, nothing being lacking but his own confession, can properly lead him to hope that his life will be spared when, even if he confess his crime, he will be punished with death.

It must be answered that opinions vary. Some hold that even a witch of ill repute, against whom the evidence justifies violent suspicion, and who, as a ringleader of the witches, is accounted very dangerous, may be assured her life, and condemned instead to perpetual imprisonment on bread and water, in case she "I give sure and convincing testimony against other witches; yet this penalty of perpetual imprisonment must not be announced to her, but only that her life will be spared, and that she will be punished in some other fashion, perhaps by exile. And doubtless such notorious witches, especially those who prepare witch-potions or who by magical methods cure those bewitched, would be peculiarly suited to be thus preserved, in order to aid the bewitched or to accuse other witches, were it not that their accusations cannot be trusted, since the Devil is a liar, unless confirmed by proofs and witnesses.

Others hold, as to this point, that for a time the promise made to the witch sentenced to imprisonment is to be kept, but that after a time she should be burned.

A third view is, that the judge may safely promise witches to spare their lives, if only he will later excuse himself from pronouncing the sentence and will let another do this in his place....

But if, neither by threats nor by promises such as these, the witch can be induced to speak the truth, then thejailers must carry out the sentence, and torture the prisoner according to the accepted methods, with more or less of severity as the delinquent's crime may demand. And, while he is being tortured, he must be questioned on the articles of accusation, and this frequently and persistently, beginning with the lighter charges-for he will more readily confess the lighter than the heavier. And, while this is being done, the notary must write down everything in his record of the trial - how the prisoner is tortured, on what points he is questioned and how he answers.

And note that, if he confesses under the torture, he must afterward be conducted to another place, that he may confirm it and certify that it was not due alone to the force of the torture.

But, if the prisoner will not confess the truth satisfactorily, other sorts of tortures must be placed before him, with the statement that unless he will confess the truth, he must endure these also. But, if not even thus he can be brought into terror and to the truth, then the next day or the next but one is to be set for a continuation of the tortures - not a repetition, for it must not be repeated unless new evidences produced.

The judge must then address to the prisoners the following sentence: We, the judge, etc., do assign to you, such and such a day for the continuation of the tortures, that from your own mouth the truth may be heard, and that the whole may be recorded by the notary.

And during the interval, before the day assigned, the judge, in person or through approved men, must in the manner above described try to persuade the prisoner to confess, promising her (if there is aught to be gained by this promise) that her life shall be spared.

The judge shall see to it, moreover, that throughout this interval guards are constantly with the prisoner, so that she may not be I alone; because she will be visited by the De and tempted into suicide.

University of Pennsylvania. Dept. of History: *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European history,*published for the Dept. of History of the University of Pennsylvania., Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press [1897?-1907?]. Vol III:4, pp, 7-10 (Papal Bull), 6-7 (Nider), 10-13 (Hammer)

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