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BEFORE SALEM: THE BURNING TIMES AND A CALL TO ALL SELF-PROCLAIMED WITCHES

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by **Emily Linstrom**

When I was fifteen I spent a few weeks out of the spring semester as an exchange student in Cologne, Germany. Our many guided outings took us to cathedrals and archaeological sites, as well as former palaces and fortresses. Among those destinations was a medieval open-air tower connected to one of the state behemoths. As we filed through the guide turned our attention to the tower's blackened walls, the irreversible effect of several hundred years of burning accused witches—primarily women, but men and children as well—alive. “Awesome,” a classmate of mine grinned, and the tour guide fixed him with a look to freeze vodka (wrong country, I know, but you get my meaning). “No,” she said calmly, “it’s not awesome. Every single person who died here was innocent.” “Even if they really *were* witches?” another classmate chimed in. Here is where memory fails me, as I can’t recall whether our guide gave up the fight and ushered us along, schooled us in the fallacy of our juvenile response to the murder of innocents (regardless of whether they were Christian or Pagan), or simply called us

dumbasses in German. (I'd like to think it was the third. Time tends to rewrite these scripts...)

What I can tell you is that I have purposely kept that tower front and center in my mind ever since, as I've continued to forge my own identity as a student of the Pagan world and, by sacred extension, witchery. It grounds and keeps me mindful, but is also why I can never quite get comfortable calling myself a witch.

A recent discussion on the School of Witchery student board raised the question of why it was so difficult to trace any post-Christian evidence of Norse Paganism in Germanic regions (with the exception of mythology and folklore). Doing my best not to sound like a know-it-all Hermione Granger, I offered my best guess: the Burning Times, that period roughly between the 16th and 18th centuries when widespread and ultimately genocidal moral panic swept through central Europe and Scandinavia. Fueled by the church, this reign of terror saw the estimated loss of up to 100,000 lives. (The period is still referred to by many as a holocaust of women; in some provinces entire villages were wiped out of their female populace.) Germanic-speaking regions of the Holy Roman Empire suffered the greatest, with the Pyrenees, Languedoc, Alps, and Spain's Basque Country all running a close second. (It's been noted that parts of Europe more open to and influenced by outside cultures comparatively eluded the mania, and I'll leave you to draw all relevant correlations.) The Burning Times also landed on American shores, famously culminating in the Salem Witch trials of 1692-1693. Only with the rise of the Age of Enlightenment, when education replaced superstition and science firmly established itself alongside spirituality, did the Burning Times finally sputter out.

When we reference previous persecution of accused witches we almost always and immediately cite the trials of Salem. And yet the body count goes much, much further back—and, conversely, forward. From the Roman slaughter of the Celts to African slaves forced to disguise their ancestral practices with Christian iconography, the very unromantic truth is that there were no “witches” as we freely apply the term today, and I imagine those likely souls would probably be appalled at being labeled as such.

Immigrants of differing religions, races, and customs, the oft-targeted Romani, persons with mental and physical disabilities, women who dared to claim agency over their minds and bodies, those who would identify today as LGBTQ, healers, scholars, philosophers, scientists, eccentrics, artists, sex workers, and locally ostracized individuals were among the many who lost their lives to witchcraft hysteria. It's no small wonder few accounts were kept around that might possibly hint at alternative spiritual practices. Where holy treason was concerned, no one was above suspicion, and any reason was good enough to bring before the secular courts. (For example, a common “witch's mark” frequently cited as irrefutable proof? The clitoris.)

To call one's self a witch is a privilege that carries a certain responsibility and awareness. In fact, there's a present—if subtle—divide between those who find the title a flippant insult and those who see it as a defiant badge of honor. Obviously there's no right or wrong stance, and I frequently go back and forth myself.

It's certainly neither a secret nor a surprise that witchcraft has enjoyed a massive boon since the latter half of the 20th century, with scholars and pop culture commentators alike noting its near-exact alignment with the sexual revolution. The rich abundance of history, equal parts magical and practical information, combined with an irresistible aesthetic have all a powerful, personal chord.

As with any popular resurgence, witchcraft has wrought its fair share of fast and loose interpretations, seemingly hitting all the marks: exploitation, horror, comedic, gothic, teen-friendly, and even a return to Puritan propaganda in the form of 2015's *The Witch*. The self-branded and social media savvy witch is a new breed in particular, and frequently the target of collective ire. A friend and fellow practicing Pagan none-too-gently describes this new generation as little more than casual dappers who “cite *The Craft* as their grimoire and openly threaten hexes on those who cross them, and are usually the first and loudest to declare themselves witches, rather than brats.” She concluded that while they may buy the ephemera, don the garlands, and refer to attractively bound books, little effort is made to delve deeper than surface appeal. Point taken, though I tend to view them as a relatively harmless faction, and in many ways positive proof that the tides are finally turning in favor of the Pagan's liberation and yes, self expression. Still, I'm wary of adopting the look and less of the practice.

To that end, a much-respected acquaintance and Alchemist reflects, “The various forms of magickal practice transform a person into a more divine being, an experience of much greater value than taking spell selfies. The person who tells me in one sentence they are mistress of the dark and the highest goddess, but can’t manifest a sustainable, stable sense of self-esteem and self-worth in the next, missed the point in my view.”

The beauty of the Pagan faith is that there is no one way to embrace it, so long as we are sincere and with intent to harm none. There is no place for judgement or hierarchy here, and while I may scoff a little at the Instagram witches, I also have to check myself when reacting from a place of presumed superiority. In the end, we’re all just trying to get home. I imagine those condemned to that tower in Cologne only wanted the same.

This hallowed season, I gently ask that we remember those who passed beyond the veil before their chosen time and against their will, or were otherwise forced to conceal their true selves. Keep a candle lit for them or leave a small but heartfelt offering in acknowledgment of their sacrifices that broke crucial ground for what is now the foundation of modern witchery.

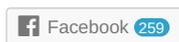
As of now I’m collecting materials to teach an in-depth course on the Burning Times: the impacted regions, practices that were carried out, and lasting cultural impact. The course will also extend to and include individuals and diaspora affected throughout history and on multiple continents. Obviously the goal is to educate, but I also hope to shine a light on those in danger of being forgotten—among them, perhaps, some of your own.

Till then, Blessed Be, you magical souls.

Image: Germanic woodcut from the Cologne witch trials

Further Reading:

Ashley L. (2014) Visualizing Child-Witch Narratives in Seventeenth-Century Cologne. Sourced from <https://sites.duke.edu/colognechildwitches/>.



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