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The Great History Of Witchcraft

Modern Day Witchcraft has its roots in the Goddess Religions, dating at least as far back as 25,000 BC during the Gravettian-Aurignacian Culture. Numerous female figurines and sculptures have been found throughout the greater part of Europe and the East, which supports the theory of a Great Mother Cult during those early years. Naturally, many attempts have been made during the ages by various cultures and religions to destroy Goddess worship. She was married off to Gods in her various aspects in order to reduce Her standing and sometimes even executed and killed. Still Her worship prevailed.

The establishment of Witchcraft was a gradual evolution, and not a conscious action. The use of the term Witch was also broadly applied and encompassed everyone from seers to healers and everything in-between. These Witches were not necessarily Goddess worshippers either. They were found in every religion and in every culture across millennia.

Until 1021AD, witches were seen by society as the Wise Ones and highly regarded as healers. They assisted with child births, were skilled in divination and understood the medicinal qualities of plants. They offered comfort and help to those in need. Many Witches of that era were Christian, which made them even easier to accept and respect.

In 1022AD, under Pope Benedict VIII's reign, all that was set to change. The execution of the first 'heretic' during 1022 heralded the start of a 753 year reign of terror, generally referred to as the Burning Times, which was to last until 1775 when the last execution of accused Witches took place; that of nine old women in Poland. Millions of people (including children!) accused of Witchcraft were killed in the most gruesome of ways during this period resulting in what is probably one of the biggest acts of genocide this world had ever seen.





The deaths of accused witches were not always at the stake. Many witches died during torture and during “provings”. Looking back on the methods employed, it sends a shudder down one’s spine. James I (1566-1624) of Scotland even wrote a book called *Daemonologie*. The purpose of this book was to explain how to identify a witch. Some of the methods employed were:

Identifying the Witch’s Mark: James I held that the Witch’s mark was a place on the body where a witch can experience no pain. The location of this area allegedly differed from one witch to another. Hence, every inch of the accused witch’s body was pricked with needles to locate the Witch’s Mark.

The Water Test: In *Daemonologie*, James I proposed that only real witches can float in water. He based this theory on the fact that water was a holy substance and as a result it would not take a Witch to its depth. As a result, an accused Witch’s hands and feet were bound before being thrown into a lake or a river. If innocent, the accused would drown. And die. If guilty, the accused would be burnt at the stake. Either way, the accused ended up dead.

During the Burning Times and even for a time thereafter, Witches went underground. From the mid 1930s onwards a slow re-emergence of Witchcraft started taking place. A leader in this re-emergence was Gerald Gardner, an Englishman. In the USA, pressure was exerted by the Spiritualist movement to repeal the Witchcraft Laws, an effort which was rewarded with success in 1951.

Witchcraft started growing steadily during the fifties in spite of some internal disputes within the hatchling Wiccan Community and a continuous attack from Fleet Street media. Still, all of this took its toll and in 1957 the Wiccan community split into two groups – one headed by Doreen Valiente and the other by Gardner. During the remainder of the fifties and until his death in 1964, Gardner was the dominant influencer in Wicca.

Doreen Valiente’s contribution to the Craft was as significant as that of Gardner. She removed most of the ‘Crowleyisms’ from Wicca and replace it with poetic phrases and compositions, the most famous of which is probably the Wiccan Rede.

The numbers of those following the Wiccan ways continued to grow gradually over the next 30 years, albeit quietly in most cases. The last 15 years have seen many Witches come out of the proverbial broom closet, inspired by influential authors such as Cunningham, Starhawk, Telesco, Buckland and Ravenwolf. It is estimated that there are currently at least 1,000,000 witches world-wide today.

A religion steeped in history, mystery and myth, the goddess tradition of Witchcraft has survived severe onslaughts over millennia. Onslaughts that probably would have destroyed any of the mainstream religions in the world today. Whilst there is much greater tolerance - at a theoretical level - of the





Craft than 50 years ago, Witches are still campaigning for tolerance at a practical level in schools, the workplace and society in general. It is inevitable, as the number Witches increases, that this campaign will ultimately result in success.

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