MALTA

Information on witchcraft practices in Malta comes from its Inquisition tribunal archives, luckily saved from total destruction during the French occupation of Malta (1798–1800). Witchcraft became a significant preoccupation of the Malta Inquisition after the arrival of the Apostolic Visitor Monsignor Pietro Dusina in 1574. Witchcraft-related proceedings rose in importance in the mid-1590s. By the early seventeenth century, witchcraft cases accounted for one-third of the Inquisition’s caseload—a level approximately maintained until the late eighteenth century.

Two main factors influenced the ways the Maltese adapted and shaped their witchcraft beliefs. First, Malta’s crowded urban harbor area was constantly receiving people from neighboring Mediterranean lands and beyond. Second, Malta was an intensely Catholic society, a situation that inevitably colored the beliefs and thinking of its inhabitants.

Malta’s harbor towns were crowded, with neighbors able to spy on each other, leaving little room for secrecy. Therefore, the more exotic types of witchcraft, such as cannibalism or night flying, occurred only in occasional denunciations by rural villagers in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. But the fact that any potentially useful witness would be acquainted with the accused and that the accused could not have done these things without being observed meant that Maltese Inquisitors rarely took accusations of exotic types of witchcraft seriously.

Meanwhile, sophisticated foreign travelers and traders introduced new ideas into Maltese society. The
presence of many people of different cultural backgrounds made residents of Malta harbor towns more tolerant of strange ideas and less threatened by them. Maltese Holy Office records reveal a steady increase in witchcraft cases from the 1590s, with the flow of accusations remaining high until the end of the eighteenth century, when the tribunal was abolished. The punishments inflicted until the early 1630s were rather harsh, although they never ended with the execution of the accused. Subsequently, however, there was no significant trend toward either severity or leniency. By the time of Inquisitor Fabio Chigi (1634–1639)—later Pope Alexander VII—the tribunal came to adopt a more bureaucratic approach, with more thorough examinations of witnesses and more formal and detailed recording procedures. The tribunal settled into a routine that enabled it to look conscientiously into each case. Nonetheless, its basic methods for handling witchcraft remained unchanged throughout the tribunal’s existence.

MALTESE WITCHCRAFT PRACTICES
A fairly clear distinction separated the type of witchcraft pursued by men from that practiced by women. Men, both clerics and others, concentrated on such potentially profitable brands of magic as treasure hunting. Perhaps the best Maltese necromancer of the early seventeenth century was the military engineer and member of the Order of St. John, Fra Vittorio Cassar. Women also shared men’s fascination for buried treasure, but they almost monopolized most types of divination, conjuration, and maleficiun (harmful magic), especially those aimed at love magic. Healing was also largely undertaken by women, although a few clerics and some slaves—largely Muslims, as well as a few members of the Jewish minority—attempted it for profit. Maltese men and women displayed fundamentally divergent motives in their attempts to manipulate supernatural forces: basically, men sought practice sorts of vengeance, whereas women’s motives were more varied and complex.

Love magic was practiced primarily by unmarried women, including widows (who were not always elderly). Married women occasionally resorted to love magic to win a husband back from another woman (though some simply accused the other woman of love magic herself). Married women also resorted to divination to ascertain whether or not their husbands, away at sea, were still alive and, if so, if they had remained faithful. Others used more passive forms of love magic to soften a husband’s harsh treatment of them. Conversely, the fact that a woman was in a stable marriage argued greatly in her favor if denounced, particularly since women under male supervision could be better controlled.

Poor moral behavior contributed greatly toward suspicions of witchcraft. This was one reason why courtesans featured so much in the list of those denounced. Living outside recognized moral norms, courtesans were expected to have few scruples about violating conventional religious standards. They also had more reason to resort to witchcraft in order to entice men, thus earning the name of meretrice (prostitute). As with most witchcraft, the courtesan’s motives can generally be reduced to love or gain. But it is clear that the courtesan-witch did not make a fortune from her witchcraft.

Another factor featuring prominently in the tribunal’s thinking, and perhaps even more so in the thinking of the Maltese urban populace, was the nationality or place of origin of the “suspect.” A good number of those accused in Malta’s witchcraft trials were in fact foreign-born. The English traveler George Sandys, who visited Malta in 1610, commented how Malta was a place that saw an influx of people of all kinds. Many of them had moved into the harbor area, particularly Valletta, from the Maltese countryside. Many residents of Valletta came from Sicily, other parts of Italy, Greece, or elsewhere, not counting the large number of Muslim slaves. Four main groups stand out: Greeks, Sicilians, French, and male Muslim slaves serving the Order of St. John. It was mainly foreigners residing in Malta, rather than transients, who were accused of witchcraft. Such foreigners were more likely to practice certain types of witchcraft in order to gain a living in a strange environment. Male Muslim slaves were experts in divination, healing, and to some extent even love magic. But in the latter category, women of Greek origin seem to have been particularly sought after—and also to bring about impotence. Moreover, for the elderly, unmarried, or widowed popular healers of the countryside, witchcraft offered a way of gaining a certain prestige as well as providing a means of survival. A similar pattern emerged from the accusations against the male Muslim slaves, who were out to amass enough money to ransom themselves from slavery and return home.

PUNISHMENTS
As in other branches of the Roman Inquisition, the sudden increase of witchcraft-related cases in the 1590s marked a pronounced shift in the Inquisition’s priorities, which is more easily identified than explained. Sixtus V’s 1586 bull against magic was clearly significant in this context, describing the types of activity most commonly dealt with by the Inquisition in the 1590s and early 1600s, although the first serious clampdown on witchcraft in Malta appears to have taken place immediately after the terrible outbreak of plague in 1592–1593 and more specifically from 1595 onward.

The Inquisition’s public punishments for witchcraft offenses certainly succeeded in advertising its disapproval of such activities, although they did not dissuade people from practicing such beliefs, as the continual flow of accusations throughout the late seventeenth and
eighteenth centuries shows. On such occasions, the methods used were meant to ensure adequate publicity and humiliation for the penitent. Penitents were made to stand at the Annunciation Church run by the Dominican friars or, more rarely, at the parish Church of St. Lawrence, both in Vittoriosa, holding a lighted candle during High Mass, usually on a feast day, to ensure that the largest possible audience witnessed the event. Public scourging, the tribunal's other main form of punishment, was inflicted in the main squares of Vittoriosa, and the penitent was then usually exiled. However, the tribunal's primary aim was to correct rather than punish. Hence, torture was generally reserved for those unwilling to accept this correction; Malta's witches were never executed, not even in the mass trials of the early seventeenth century.

By the late 1640s, the tribunal had almost accepted witchcraft as a fact of life in Malta and had established its own routines for dealing with it. The number of voluntary confessions for witchcraft increased by the mid-seventeenth century and remained steady right up to the last years of the tribunal. Nonetheless, it appears that Maltese society began to frown upon witchcraft practices, indicating that the tribunal's policy of publicizing its dealings with known offenders had indeed paid off. Obviously, the Inquisition had not been successful in eradicating witchcraft from Maltese society. Some witches saw little to fear from the Holy Office. They either believed they would never be caught, or even if they were, the mild punishment did not deter them. Popular magic outlasted the tribunal, which was suppressed in 1798. Some Maltese even seem to have been virtually addicted to witchcraft as a way of life. Thus, it continued to be practiced in the form of healing and as a way to ward off the evil eye, right into the twentieth century.

CARMEL CASSAR

See also: INQUISITION, ROMAN; LOVE MAGIC.

References and further reading:

Mandrake

The mandrake plant, Mandragora officinarum, is probably the best-known poisonous herb found in the witches' pharmacopoeia. Mandrakes were the subjects of much folkloric herbal beliefs, including the concept that the plants generated at the foot of a gallows from the semen of the executed. Mandrake plants were thus considered to be partially "human" and to have roots that resembled either the lower limbs or genitalia of human males or females. Sixteenth-century herbalists commonly presented the "male" and "female" varieties of the plants. For example, such plants are shown in Johannes de Cuba's Hortus Santissimae, a sixteenth-century herbal published in Frankfurt.

Being partly human, mandrake plants were thought to emit horrible screams when harvested, which gave rise to the folk belief that a dog should be employed to draw up the root because the scream of the plant could kill a human. Early herbalists sometimes show this method of harvest employing such "drug-smelling