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The Role of Animals in Early Modern European Witchcraft Trials: In the Village, In Demonology, & In Folklore

In this essay I will argue that animals played an integral role in all aspects of witchcraft trials in early modern Europe. Animals were present materially in the village, in the imagined sabbath of demonologists, and in the popular folkloric beliefs of the public. Humans and animals have historically been interconnected in almost all facets of life, including religion. The importance of animals in relation to early modern European witchcraft was influenced by various long standing traditions and beliefs such as shamanism and animal symbolism in Ancient Greek mythology.

Since ancient times, people in Europe have had important relationships with and lived in close proximity to animals of many kinds. Primary sources from these periods show us evidence of how animals were present in almost every sphere of human life. Animals were used for labour, transportation, food, clothing, medicine, and companionship. They also played a significant role within religion, often depicted in Christian artwork and representing specific biblical figures. In both the spiritual and material world, animals had varied roles and uses and could be perceived as representations of both good or evil. Some species were regarded as companions and were treated with respect, while some were seen only as food, and some seen as pests. Creatures of all kinds were nonetheless very important in all aspects of human life.¹

¹ Boria Sax, "The Magic of Animals: English Witch Trials in the Perspective of Folklore," *Anthrozoös* 22, no. 4 (2009), 326.

Beginning in the early modern period, there was a significant shift in the way that most European people thought about different animals. Companion animals such as cats and dogs were becoming more popular. On the other hand, the relationship between humans and farm animals was becoming increasingly more distant as livestock was moved further from the living space and into separate shelters. This separation further influenced the perceived division between human beings and beasts. Being associated with beast-like qualities was becoming a more common concern as it was used as a form of degradation. For example, children were discouraged from crawling on all fours to avoid being associated with four footed beasts. Some scholars refer to this period as the beginning of a "post-domestic society", in which humans live comfortably with companion animals in their homes but are both physically and emotionally detached from animals that are regularly slaughtered for food or used for labour.²

Despite the separation of livestock from the home, farm animals were still integral to early modern European peasants' livelihoods. Villagers often shared animals that were used for ploughing, as farming was a collaborative effort within the community.³ This aspect of their daily lives was sometimes the cause of conflicts between villagers that ultimately led to many witchcraft accusations. In the 1598 trial of Françatte Camont from the duchy of Lorraine, 10 out of 20 recorded witness statements speak of animal death or illness after interacting with the accused witch. One man named Jean Claude Maimbourg claims that after being threatened by Françatte Camont he lost 8 horses and 4 oxen.⁴ The sudden deaths of livestock could be catastrophic for villagers during this time period as it also meant the loss of vital food sources

² Sax, "The Magic of Animals", 327-8.

³ Julian Goodare, *The European Witch-Hunt*. London: Routledge, 2016, 95.

⁴ "The Trial of Francatte Camont in Lorraine, 1598," In *The Witchcraft Sourcebook*. Ed. Brian P. Levack. New York: Routledge, 2004.

and labour. People looked for explanations for these sudden misfortunes and one explanation was the idea of witches within the community using magic to harm others.⁵

In the village, animals were used in many ways for various types of magic. One early case from 14th century Paris speaks of a woman who used toads to perform a magical spell that would harm her husband. It states that when she wanted to hurt her husband, who was abusive and frequently beat her, she needed to capture two toads and put them into separate clay pots. She then “stabbed the toads hard with long needles or small iron spikes, and the person who she intended to hurt would suffer the same way the toads suffered, or something similar, and would not be able to rest anywhere, even though there was no danger of his dying, only becoming weak and sick”.⁶ In a sense this specific scenario could be perceived as being both harmful and protective magic, since the woman was doing it to harm her husband but also trying to protect herself from his abuse. Another example of animals being used for magic can be found in a pamphlet from 16th century Scotland titled “King James and the Witches of North Berwick: *Newes from Scotland* (1591)”. The pamphlet states that a woman named Agnes Tompson reportedly collected venom from a black toad to put on any piece of cloth that King James had soiled, such as a handkerchief. However, she was unable to obtain any such object and her attempt to harm him was ultimately a failure.⁷ Still, these stories show us just a few of the ways animals could be used to perform magic.

Just as animals were often used for transportation between places in the material world, they were also important for transportation from the village to the imagined sabbath so commonly depicted in demonological writings. The famous demonologist Nicolas Remy, who

⁵ Goodare, *European Witch-Hunt*, 89-90.

⁶ “Magic with toads and a wax image, 1390-1391.” In *Witch Beliefs and Witch Trials in the Middle Ages: Documents and Readings*. Ed. P.G. Maxwell-Stuart. London: Continuum, 2011, 178-180.

⁷ “King James and the Witches of North Berwick: *Newes from Scotland* (1591).” www.sacred-texts.com/pag/kjd/kjd11.htm (public domain), 3.

was responsible for the executions of over 800 witches in the late 16th century, wrote in his witchcraft treatise *Demonolatry* about witches flying on the backs of animals to the sabbath. He mentions that witches sometimes rode on animals such as pigs, dogs, or even “a huge mighty bull”.⁸ Investigators from various trials talk of witches riding on animals to the sabbath, such as in the records from the trial of Els from Merspurg. The accused witch Els reportedly confessed to riding a dog or wolf, along with a group of other witches who also rode on unidentified creatures but thought to be either dogs or wolves.⁹ These reports of witches flying through the night sky on four footed beasts might have stemmed from demonologists attempting to rationalize their ideas of the sabbath with concepts from everyday life, such as people riding on horses to get around. It is also interesting to note that according to scripture the air was considered the natural habitat of demons and the domain of the Devil, so the idea of flight to the sabbath was a reasonable theory in such context.¹⁰

After arriving at the sabbath, animals were still very much present and played a key role among the gathering of witches. In many demonologist artworks from the height of the European witch hunts, numerous creatures can commonly be seen in these lively depictions of the sabbath. One of the most common animals seen is the goat. A 1570 painting from Zurich shows a scene of the witches sabbath with a large horned and cloven foot creature sitting on a gold coloured throne in the center of the image. Around the creature are a few other horned animals as well as normal looking humans who seem to be worshipping and giving offerings to the central figure. The large horned creature in this painting is likely a depiction of the Devil in one of his many forms.¹¹ Another image from around the same time period shows an even larger scene of an

⁸ Nicolas Remy, “The Devil’s Mark and Flight to the Sabbath, 1595.” In *The Witchcraft Sourcebook*. Ed. Brian P. Levack. New York: Routledge, 2004, 85.

⁹ “Els from Merspurg and her dealings with the Devil, c.1450,” In *Witch Beliefs and Witch Trials in the Middle Ages: Documents and Readings*. Ed. P.G. Maxwell-Stuart. London: Continuum, 2011, 202.

¹⁰ Goodare, *European Witch-Hunt*, 59.

¹¹ Witches’ Sabbat (Zurich, 1570), Representations of the witches’ sabbat (on Moodle), slide 7.

imagined sabbath, this time at Trier. Goats, cats, rats, and horses can be seen throughout the artwork, some alive and some depicted with skeletal forms. Some of the animals are being ridden by naked witches and some seem to be engaging in sexual acts, both of these things representing the sinful acts of witches and worshippers of the Devil.¹² Furthermore, there have been numerous reports of the Devil appearing to people in the form of different animals, especially in the form of a goat. Some examples include: an account from 1432 in which a woman called on Lucifer and he appeared in the form of a goat, the 1621 trial of Elizabeth Sawyer in which she confesses the Devil came to her in the shape of a dog, and the 1324 trial of Dame Alice Kyteler in which she states that the Devil sometimes appeared to her in the shape of a cat or a shaggy black dog.¹³

The Devil was not the only one who could change into the form of animals; some demonologists believed that witches could also shapeshift into animals on command. The previously mentioned Nicolas Remy was one such man who wrote about witches' ability to shapeshift. He writes in his treatise that according to confessions he has gathered, witches could transform into cats to secretly enter their neighbours homes at night or into wolves to kill all of the village livestock.¹⁴ The idea of witches shapeshifting into animals was widely accepted during the time of the early modern European witch hunts across most of the continent.¹⁵ The Devil taught witches how to transform into different animals using specific herbs, and they would do this often so as to have advantage over their victims.¹⁶ Moreover, any wounds inflicted

¹² Witches' Sabbath at Trier (1594), Representations of the witches' sabbat (on Moodle), slide 8.

¹³ "The Devil appears in the form of a goat, 1432." In *Witch Beliefs and Witch Trials in the Middle Ages: Documents and Readings*. Ed. P.G. Maxwell-Stuart. London: Continuum, 2011, 144; "The Trial and Confession of Elizabeth Sawyer, 1621." In *The Witchcraft Sourcebook*. Ed. Brian P. Levack. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2015, 266; "The Trial of Dame Alice Kyteler, 1324." In *The Witchcraft Sourcebook*. Ed. Brian P. Levack. New York: Routledge, 2004, 41.

¹⁴ Remy, "The Devil's Mark and Flight to the Sabbath, 1595." 86.

¹⁵ Paweł Rutkowski, "Animal Transformation in Early Modern English Witchcraft Pamphlets," *Anglica* 28, no. 1 (2015): 21.

¹⁶ Martin Osterero, "The Rise of the Witchcraft Doctrine," In *The Routledge History of Witchcraft*, ed. Johannes Dillinger. London: Routledge, 2020, 22.

onto witches while in animal form would remain once the witch had reverted back to their human shape. This fact played a key role in witchcraft investigations as any unusual mark on a suspected witch's body could be used against them.¹⁷

While the belief of animal metamorphosis was widespread across most of continental Europe during the early modern period, it was less commonly seen in English witchcraft trials as they had their own unique idea of how animals were involved with witchcraft. The well known folklore concept of the witch's familiar is almost entirely unique to English witchcraft trials, though similar concepts were occasionally found scattered across the continent. England differed from most of Europe in the fact that the witch's sabbath was almost completely absent from trial records. Instead of animal metamorphosis and the sabbath, English witches usually had contact with the Devil through demonic spirits in the shape of small animals.¹⁸ Familiars could come in the shape of many different creatures but were most commonly in the shape of cats, dogs, toads, mice, and sometimes birds or even insects. These creatures were not innocent nor were they real animals, they were demons who took the form of earthly beings in order to act as a sort of intermediary messenger between witches and the Devil.¹⁹ In the 1566 trial records of the Chelmsford Witches in England, one of the accused witches named Elizabeth Francis confesses to having a familiar in the form of a small white-spotted cat who she called Satan. She kept the cat in a basket and took care of it by feeding it bread and milk and in return the cat promised to make her rich. Another of the Chelmsford witches, Agnes Waterhouse, reportedly also had a

¹⁷ Osterero, "The Rise of the Witchcraft Doctrine," 22; Ronald Hutton, "Witches and Animals," in *The Witch: A History of Fear from Ancient Times to the Present* (Yale University Press, 2017), 265.

¹⁸ Helen Parish, "'Paltrie Vermin, Cats, Mice, Toads, and Weasils': Witches, Familiars, and Human-Animal Interactions in the English Witch Trials," *Religions* 10, no. 134 (2019), 1-2.

¹⁹ Parish, "Paltrie Vermin, Cats, Mice, Toads, and Weasils", 5; Sax, "The Magic of Animals", 318-20.

white cat who she willed to destroy her neighbours cattle and to kill a man in return for feeding the cat milk and drops of blood.²⁰

As can be seen by the confessions of the Chelmsford witches, the relationship between a witch and a familiar was usually transactional. Other than milk and bread, familiars often demanded to suck blood from the body of the witch. The image of familiars suckling blood from witches, especially female witches, was a juxtaposition to the pureness of motherhood and the feeding of infants.²¹ Familiars could suck blood from different parts of the body, but generally it was from private parts such as the breasts or even the genitals.²² In the trial records of Elizabeth Sawyer from 17th century England, the elderly woman confesses that the Devil in the form of a little dog would regularly put his head under her coats and suckle blood from a teat for a quarter of an hour.²³ The idea of familiars suckling from hidden teats on a witch's body converged with the more widespread continental concept of the Devil's mark, which was a hidden mark the Devil would leave on a witch once they had made a pact with him.²⁴ During both continental and English witch trials, people's bodies would often be searched for these marks by forcing the suspected witches to strip completely naked and shaving off all of their hair against their will. In the pamphlet "*Newes from Scotland*" from 1591 it states that Agnes Sampson "had all her hair shaven off, in each part of her body, and her head rung with a rope (...) until the Devil's mark was found upon her privates".²⁵ This practice could be considered a form of torture even if not classified as one at the time, as it would have been incredibly humiliating and dehumanizing for anyone who had to go through it.

²⁰ "The Confessions of the Chelmsford Witches, England (1566)," In *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, 2nd ed. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 304-5.

²¹ Parish, "Paltie Vermin, Cats, Mice, Toads, and Weasils", 7.

²² Hutton, "Witches and Animals." 275.

²³ "The Trial and Confession of Elizabeth Sawyer, 1621.", 266.

²⁴ Hutton, "Witches and Animals." 275.

²⁵ "King James and the Witches of North Berwick.", 2.

The concept of the witch's familiar along with other magical animal traditions related to witchcraft resemble many other folklore traditions from around the world, therefore it is hard to pinpoint where they may have originated from. One of the possible influences on the concept of animal familiars and animal metamorphosis may have come from archaic shamanistic practices from the region of Siberia. Another possibility is that the ideas originated from ancient Greek mythology, in which various Greek deities often had companion animals depicted by their sides. However, these beliefs both fall under the broader categories of "grateful animals" or "spirit companions" that were common not only in Christianity but in many other belief systems as well. The word 'familiar' itself comes from the biblical term "familiar spirit", which refers to a demonic companion of a witch. Some cultures, such as the English, just happened to imagine the companion to be in the form of a small animal.²⁶ In Christian belief, different animals were perceived differently and were thought to represent both good and evil values. For instance, cats such as the ones in the case of the Chelmsford witches, were associated with wicked and lecherous women. This is one of the reasons that felines became so prominently associated with the stereotypical hag witch. Cats were also connected to heresy in general. The Waldensians and The Knights Templar were denounced for supposedly kissing the Devil's feline behind.²⁷ In the case of dogs, they were associated with evil and hell as well. This is likely why so many witches reportedly rode on dogs or wolves on their way to the sabbath.²⁸ One of the animals most commonly representing the Devil, the goat, has been a symbol of carnal sexuality and libido since ancient times; probably because of its association with the Greek god Dionysus. The Devil was portrayed as a goat in a number of demonological writings and artwork from the early

²⁶ Sax, "The Magic of Animals", 321-24; Goodare, *European Witch-Hunt*, 131.

²⁷ Beryl Rowland, *Animals with Human Faces: A Guide to Animal Symbolism*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1973, 51-3.

²⁸ Rowland, *Animals With Human Faces: A Guide to Animal Symbolism*, 60-1.

modern period because it represented the inversion of holy Christian behaviour. This is also why witches are shown riding nude on goats in various pieces of art depicting the witch's sabbath.²⁹

Overall, the early modern European witchcraft trials regularly involved both real animals within the village as well as imagined animals at the sabbath and in popular folklore. In the village, farm animals were frequently the cause of village quarrels that led to witchcraft allegations. Villagers also used animals for magic spells, both protective and harmful. In demonology, animals were present on the way to the sabbath and at the sabbath itself. The Devil and witches could take the shape of various animals in order to harm others. In folkloric belief, animal familiars acted as middle men between the Devil and witches who worshipped him, using blood as a form of payment. These beliefs were likely influenced by a mixture of older traditions such as shamanism and Greek mythology, as well as animal symbolism from early modern Christian belief. Animals and humans have long been interconnected in many parts of life, which is why animals played such key roles in an event as major as the witchcraft trials as they spread across much of Europe throughout the early modern period.

²⁹ Rowland, *Animals With Human Faces: A Guide to Animal Symbolism*, 80-3.

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Images (from slides on Moodle):

Witches’ Sabbat (Zurich, 1570), Representations of the witches’ sabbat (on Moodle), slide 7.

Witches’ Sabbath at Trier (1594), Representations of the witches’ sabbat (on Moodle), slide 8.

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