

witches AND PAGANS:

WOMEN IN EUROPEAN
FOLK RELIGION, 700-1100



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PREFACE

Writing this book has been a forty-year process of excavation, gathering, sorting, comparison, verification, tossing, re-reading, and serial discovery. It meant assembling a mosaic of many bits of information, arranging and rearranging them to see what patterns emerged. It has taken decades to chase down and assemble the relevant documentation—a search that has proved to be virtually bottomless. The book I had originally envisioned burst its bounds as chapters grew into volumes. And yet more remains to be uncovered.

This is the first published volume of a multiple-volume sourcebook, but it is not volume I. *Witches and Pagans* falls at the mid-point, as Volume VII. The books overlap chronologically—especially this one and the preceding volume, *Women in a Time of Overlords*. For a variety of reasons, I decided to start at the tipping point of the early Middle Ages, when the war on heathen culture was in full cry. Evidence from those hostile witnesses, the clergy, testifies to beliefs and observances that would have otherwise been lost to us.

Researching this subject means confronting how the cultural history of Europe has been organized up until now. Christian and Roman bias has ruled in the general studies, most of which present a sterile aristocratic front. Specialized articles offer more depth of detail, but often fail to make broader connections between cultures. Historians are making progress in synthesizing archaeology, history, literature and orature, but it is still difficult to find the women—most of all the common women who were at the center.

My approach is ethnohistorical: looking for traces of folk religions and philosophies by going through archaeology, the written record, and orature. It has also meant searching for what language can tell us about the fabric of cultures that were ripped apart more than a millennium ago. Much of the book turns on language, the names and meanings that are an important part of the cultural record, but which remain mostly hidden in obscure texts, unknown to all but a narrow slice of specialists. Linguistics may seem arcane to most people, but it illuminates concepts held by the old ethnic spiritual philosophies.

A hundred different paths branch out from every subject, name, story and ceremony in this book. It is impossible to pursue them all in a single

volume. My way of organizing the information has been to draft it out and see what constellates: delving into the origins of *witch*, *heathen*, *rune*, *fate*, *faery*, *weird* and *worship*; tracking how the words morph and migrate in meaning; and accounting for the filters through which the heritage passes, the distorting lenses that obscure old cultural foundations. By plunging down to the deep layers, we find names for spirit and soul, for the sacred mead of vision, the illuminating wisdom that the Irish called *imbas forosnai*.

In this search for what has survived, and how it has shifted under pressure and over time, several thematic strands emerge. Among them are distaff, spindle, weaving, fortune, and the Fates (in all their many ethnic titles). Ceremonial strands include incantation, prophecy and divination, rites of healing, herb-gathering and medicines. Other strands belong to consecrated tools: witch's wands and seiðstafis, crystal balls, sieve pendulums, knots, runes, and pouches for *taufr* or *lyb* amulets. The strands of place take us into weirding at Nature sanctuaries—wells, stones, and trees (“peace-spots”)—and to the rich megalithic lore. Those in turn connect to faeries, elves, and ancestors, who are interwoven with folk goddesses and the lore of place.

The seeresses and goddesses can be found in the corners of the androcentric poems and sagas. Snake-suckling Mother Earth appears at the margins of 10th century Christian missals, and Romanesque church sculpture gradually transforms her into the sexualized figure of “Luxuria.” Diviners and chanters over herbs are scolded in the bishops’ polemics, as the canonists and penitential writers catalogue forbidden aspects of the ethnic cultures. They also show us, through a dark glass, an old mythology of witches who go by night with the goddess, whether she is called Diana, Herodias, or Holda. From this folk base the demonologists constructed their persecutory mythology, which has been so successful in redefining the meaning of witch, and in substituting a male anti-god for the heathen goddesses.

All this information is fragmented, but the aggregate sketches out a picture that falsifies the assumption of swift and complete christianization. The torn web of culture can't be completely reconstructed, but it is possible to glimpse parts and patterns. History does not go in straight lines or line up in neat rows; it grows and curves in a tangle of interrelating cultures. Orthodox history frowns on introducing modern comparisons, but we need the insights offered by Romanian women's way of gathering herbs, or Scottish cures with

the “wresting thread.” They illustrate the kind of folkways that early medieval canonists were trying to stamp out.

Mixing historical and spiritual themes is also disapproved as not fitting the proper historical grid; but that is itself a distorting lens that steers us away from the untold stories (and from the politicization of culture in the early feudal period). So this book moves from Norns and *fatas*, to the meaning of names for witches, to the archaeomythology of Irish megalithic lore, and then to the women who go by night with a goddess. Casting a wide net is the only way to get at the texture of culture, the weave of concepts that people lived in, and their social realities. The myths shift—they do—but that does not mean they contain no ancient memory. Some very old through-lines are visible in the megalithic traditions, the faith in *disir*, and chanting over herbs.

This book does not posit a feminist wonderland for the early Middle Ages. These were patriarchal societies, rife with rape and abuse, captivity, slavery, and serfdom, and harsh enforcement of the sexual double standard. Some of them burned or drowned witches, or imposed female ordeals of red-hot iron. This sexual politics demands a critical eye. But it is past time to recognize that female spheres of power existed too, which repression and bias have rendered invisible. The complex of meanings around *weaving*, *distaff*, and *fates* is grounded in women’s work, women’s power and knowledge and ceremony. Even stereotypes of witch’s wands and crystal balls have a material basis in history and archaeology, beyond the undervalued cultural testimony of folk orature, with its deep conservational substrate.

For forty years I presented slide talks under the title *Witches and Pagans*. While completing this book, I wondered whether *Witches and Heathens* might not be a more suitable title, as the percentage of Germanic material ballooned. But “heathens” has taken on a culturally specific meaning today, and in the end I decided to go with the broader title. In presenting witch names from masculine-default languages, I choose to use the female forms. They are the hardest to find, buried under the preferred masculine convention—and eclipsed by it in most linguistic discussions.

For Norse and Old English, I’ve kept the accent marks and the *eth* (ð), but decided not use the *thorn* character (þ) because it looks too much like a P, and would be confusing or incomprehensible to most readers. I use ö for Norse o-with-cedilla. Names like *cailleach*, *calliagh*, *caillech* are given as spelled in the sources, as they vary according to dialect. Words preceded by an asterisk indi-

cate linguistic reconstructions using the comparative method.

After decades of chasing down information, and fact-checking it multiple times, errors are inevitable. I kept finding them in many of the sources, as I got to know the terrain better. These were factual errors in scholarly sources, not just in books that indulge in inventions like “Celtic Wicca.” Out of the hundreds of books and articles I read since 1970, it wasn’t possible to retrieve every citation. As it is, I hope non-scholarly readers will not be daunted by the thicket of annotations. This book is intended as a sourcebook, and on a subject as controversial as this one, documentation is a necessity.

The table of contents gives a basic overview of where information is located in this book. The number of names and topics is quite large, so for reasons of space (and the digital advantage of searchability) the index is available online: www.veleda.net/witchesandpagans/index/

Most terms are explained in the text, but it covers such a large number of ethnic concepts that readers may find the glossary useful:
www.veleda.net/witchesandpagans/glossary/ .

Further commentaries can be found at www.suppressedhistories.net/witchesandpagans/commentaries/

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