

WITCHES AND PAGES:

WOMEN IN EUROPEAN
FOLK RELIGION, 700-1100



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NAMES OF THE WITCH

Modern “Western” culture is saturated with demonized concepts of the witch, while lacking knowledge about authentic cultural practices in its own past. For this reason, many readers will be surprised to find that the oldest names for witch in European languages emphasize their spiritual gifts: powers of prophecy, divination, and incantation; of healing, herbal knowledge, shapeshifting and shamanic flight. Some cultures named witches after their magical staffs or masks or animal spirits. Others described them in language relating to Wisdom, Fate, and the Mysteries. With few exceptions, the old witch-titles honored these women as cultural authorities, in sharp contrast to later diabolist stereotypes that portrayed witches exclusively as demonic cursers and destroyers.

One of the Norse names used for such women was *fjölkyngi*, “of manifold knowledge.”¹ The English cognate *cunning woman* is based on the same ancient root of “knowing,” which also survives in the expression “beyond his ken.” It is related to *know* and *gnostic* and Sanskrit *jñana*, “wisdom.” The Norse *vísendakona*, literally “wise woman,” and *vítka* (“sorceress”) are both derived from an archaic root of seeing and knowing. The Latin *saga* (“wisewoman”) survived in French as *sage-femme*. The Russian healer-name знахарка (*znakharka*) means a “woman who knows.”² Crossing into the Uralic language family, the Finnish word *tietäjä* is an ungendered term for “knower.” The more common Finnish word for “witch” is *noita* (again, not gendered) which is closely related to *noaidi*, the Sámi title for a shaman, and to shaman-words in other Uralic languages.

PROPHETIC WITCHES

*The Fates I fathom, yet farther I see
See far and wide the worlds around.*³

Many names in Slavic and Celtic languages describe the witch as a foreknowing seeress. In Russian she is *vyed'ma*, in Polish *wiedzma*, and in southern Slavic tongues, *vyeshchitsa* or *vedavica*: all meaning “knower.”

(Every Slavic language has some form of this word for “wisewoman”; see table at the end of this chapter.) The Slavic names come from the same Proto-Indo-European root *weid, “to see,” as the Russian verb видеть or видать, “to see,” and as the Indic Veda, “knowledge.”

The Old Celtic root *wel-, “to see,” shares the same deep root. It in turn yielded the Gaulish word for “witch,” *uidlua*,⁴ and its close relatives: Welsh *gwelet*, “seer,” and Old Irish *velet*, later *fili*, *filed*, *banfilé*, “poet, seer.”⁵ The name of the Irish prophetess Fedelm descends from that root.⁶ So does Veleda, the title of a revolutionary Bructerian seeress in ancient Germania.⁷

The English translation of *fili* as “poet” fails to convey its spiritual context or its cultural prestige. The *fili* was expected to be skilled in three powers. First and foremost was *imbas forosnai*, the “wisdom that illuminates,” which was inspired prophetic vision. The seeress Fedelm and the woman warrior Scáthach were said to prophesy from *imbas forosnai*.⁸

The significance of the second concept, *teinm láida*, “breaking of pith or marrow,” is no longer understood, except that it involved chanting. The third technique was called *díchetal di chennaib* (“chanting from heads”), which was a spontaneous incantation.⁹

Proto-Indo-European *weid also gave rise to the Old Irish word *wissuh, “knowledge,” which produced *ban-fissid*, “seeress.”¹⁰ More recent Irish titles—*ban feasa* “wisewoman” and *cailleach feasa* “wise old woman”—derive from that same root.¹¹ So does the pivotal concept *imbas*, “wisdom,” from *imb-fiuss or *imb-fess, “great knowledge.” This derivation is quite old, given in the prologue to the *Senchas Mór*, in the early 700s.¹²

The *fáith* or *ban-fáith* was a prophetic woman who was “expert in supernatural wisdom.”¹³ The modern Irish form *banfháidh* (also *fáidhbhean*) is

based on *fáidh*, “seer, prophet, sage,” a word with an interesting late usage as “the Fates.”¹⁴



France, circa 600-700

The related noun *fáth* meant “divination.”¹⁵ The title *ban-fílid* / *ban-fíle*, from the same root as Gaulish *uidliua*, “witch,” signified a female bard or poet, which in Irish had strong spiritual connotations. The druid-names will be more familiar to most people: *ban-druí* or *ban-draoi*, “druid-woman.”¹⁶ Linguists think that Celtic

fáith was borrowed into Latin as *vates*, “divinely inspired seer, soothsayer,” and *vaticination*, “prediction, prophecy.” Its Indo-European root meant “possessed, frenzied, inspired.”¹⁷

Spiritual inspiration is also the basis of the Latin *divina*, “diviner, one who performs divination.”¹⁸ Isidore of Seville admitted that *divinus/divina* means a person filled with the divine, although he saw these soothsayers in a very negative light. But like other priests of his time, he was obliged to acknowledge the cultural consensus that the *divini* were usually right.

Isidore identified two kinds of seership, “one which comes from art” — such as casting and reading lots—and “the other from prophetic frenzy,” or in other words, an oracular ecstasy.¹⁹ Latin *divina* flowed out into French *devine* or *devineresse*, Italian *indovina*, English *diviner*, and Welsh *dewines*.



Merovingian France

The English word *soothsayer* literally means “truth-sayer.” There was a verbal form, “to say sooth.” The same meaning pops up in Church Latin as *veratrix*.²⁰ The *auguriatrix* (“woman who reads omens”) is listed among people targeted in Charlemagne’s repression of pagans, circa 800 CE. Arno of Salzburg also listed the *auguriatrix* among *incantatores* and other “sorcerers” that people turned to in times of trouble. They were reputed to heal sick people and animals.²¹

The clergy preferred to use Latin titles, and occasionally Greek ones like *sibyl* and *pythonissa*. *Pythia* (“snake woman”) was the ancient title of the Delphic oracle who, inspired by her serpent-spirit, prophesied in spiritual ecstasy. After the Christian empire suppressed the ancient lineage of Pythias, medieval clergymen adopted the latinized *pythonissa* from the Vulgate Bible as a term for entranced and prophetic witches. Thus, an 8th century Irish text quotes the condemnation in Leviticus of people who had “a python or divinatory spirit.”²² Around the same time, the *Homilia de sacrilegiis* says,

And those who are *divinus* or *divinas*, that is, *pythonissas*, through whom the demons give answers to those who come to question them, who believe what they say, and go to the hidden place, or listens to anything from the demons [spirits], is not a Christian, but a pagan.²³

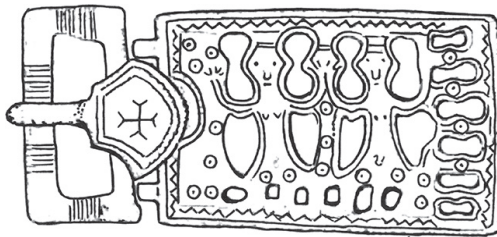
Romanized terms have obscured and eclipsed indigenous witch names in many places. By late antiquity, the Gauls and Hispani were calling healer-diviners *ariolae* (female) and *arioli* (male). Though the masculine plural supposedly included females, French bishops went out of their way to specify women in their attacks on the “*arioli* and *ariolae*.”²⁴ People consulted them in Nature sanctuaries, or invited them to their homes for divinations, healings and purifications. The priesthood insisted that their ceremonies and incantations were made to “demons,” but this barely dented their prestige among the people.²⁵

German bishops at the synod of Erfurt (932) went so far as to prohibit fasting “because it is perceived as being done more for the sake of divination [*ariolandi*] than as a supplement to Catholic law.”²⁶ A 9th century penitential also reveals that people were undertaking fasts “in honor of the Moon for the sake of a cure.”²⁷

DIVINERS

An influential group of witch-names derives from Latin *sortiaria*: “one who reads or influences fate, fortune.” It is based on *sors* (genitive *sortis*), meaning “destiny,” “oracular response,” and “lots.”²⁸ From the same root came *sortilega*: “reading or gathering of lots”—or of “fates.” The root *legere* means “to gather, select, read.” Modern Italian still retains the sense of “read,” but the word’s oldest foundation is found in the Greek *legein*, “to gather.”

In the early middle ages, *sortilega* still signified a diviner, a lot-caster, as Isidore of Seville indicated. (*Sortiaria* still means divination by lots or cards in modern Spanish.) From *sortiaria* came *sorcière*, which became the primary word for “witch” in French. It was borrowed into English as *sorceress*, a word which was strongly marked female; its first known use (circa 1384) predated *sorcerer* (1526) by 150 years.²⁹



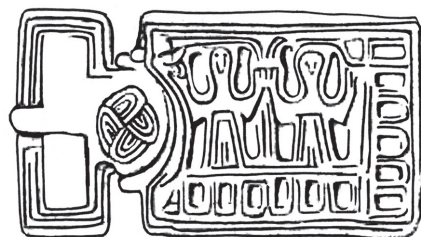
Invokers: Merovingian buckle, France

and began to be used for many kinds of witchcraft, including healing and

Sortiaria soon lost its specific meaning of divination,

weather magic. Pirmin of Reichenau ordered his parishioners, “Do not believe weather-sorceresses, nor give them anything for that reason, nor *inpuriae* who, they say, men put on the roof so that they can tell them the future, whatever of good or evil is coming to them.”³⁰ The *Corrector sive Medicus* also deplored the custom of sitting on the roof to see future events. An anonymous sermon uses the same epithet *inpurae* for “impure” women who set out offering tables on January 1.³¹

A denunciation of soothsayers and enchanters in the early 800s refers to people who interpret dreams.³² So does the Capitularia written by an archbishop of Tours in the same period.³³ Ghärbald of Liège placed “those who observe dreams” among lot-casters, soothsayers, and amulet-wearers in his Belgian capitulary.³⁴ In



Invoking: buckle at Arbon, France

fact, over twenty penitential books refer to dream interpreters (*somnariii*), though none of them give much detail.³⁵ An 11th century Spanish manual warns priests against those who “practiced or scrutinized dreams, woolwork or sorcery.”³⁶ (Once again, textile arts are connected to divination and witchcraft.) Old High German sources also refer occasionally to old women who interpreted dreams.³⁷ Words for “dream-readers” are recorded for Norse and Old English.³⁸

Sermons, penitentials, and other priestly sources conflate the *sortilegi*, *divini*, *arioli*, *incantatores* and *praecantatores*, often using them interchangeably.³⁹ The writers are deliberately cryptic, avoiding detailed description of the customs. Their language is confusing, with the meanings of the Latin words drifting on ethnic tongues. But however poor their mastery of Latin, the priests adhere to its masculine default, obscuring women from view except when the writer goes out of his way to name them. About two dozen texts do explicitly name female diviners and enchanters. But language conceals many others, as Bernadette Filotas points out: “Burchard of Worms himself, who time and again identified women as the principal practitioners of magic, never gave the feminine form of any word for magician.”⁴⁰

The Norse had an expression for consulting a diviner: *ganga til frétta* “go for news,” or “institute an inquiry.”⁴¹ Old Norse *frétt* corresponded to

Old High German *freht* and Old English *fyrht*, “divination, oracle.”⁴² *Fyrht* appears in King Cnut’s catalog of forbidden heathenisms in the year 1020, along with “the worship of heathen gods, and the sun or the moon, fire or rivers, water-wells or stones, or forest-trees...”⁴³ Icelandic sagas refer to another kind of divination, *thriefa*, in which a woman touched a person’s body in order to read and foresee events to come, especially fate in battle.⁴⁴

The Latvian word for “witch,” *burt* (male *burtneks*) derives from *burtas*, lots, and *burten*, “to divine or conjure.” These words are related to Lithuanian *burtas*, “lot,” and *burtininkas*, “lot-caster.”⁴⁵

The Basque *sorguiñ* or *xorguiña* derives from the same root as *sorceress*, adding the suffix *guiñ* / *eguiñ* “which means somebody who does or makes something.”⁴⁶ So a *sorguiña* is a fate-maker, who sees and works with destiny. The British *weirding-woman* and *weirdwife* also act upon destiny, which is the root meaning of Old English Wyrð.

Similarly, a complex of Latin-root words (*hechicera*, *faytillera*, *facturière*, *faiturière*, *fatucchiera*, etc.) describe the witch as a “doer, maker”—one who causes things to happen. The deep meaning of the Slavic root *charodeia* (as in Russian чародейка) also originated from an Indo-European root “to make.” It has the same root as Sanskrit *krti*, “do, make”; Lithuanian *kerai*, “magic”; and Middle Irish *creth*, “poetry.”⁴⁷

The Basque diviner was called *azti*. Like healers and the *sorguiñes*, she acquired spirit helpers called Mamarro or Galtzagorri. The *azti* were said to keep as many as four of these spirits living in their needlecases. The Basque word for these containers, *kuthun*, can also mean “amulet, book, or letter”—all magically charged things.⁴⁸

The witchen nature of the needlecase seems to grow out of its association with spinning. Early medieval archaeological finds suggest a spiritual charge for threadboxes buried with women, some of which



Threadbox, Burwell, Cambridgeshire

contained herbs, including camomile (Gumbs-heim, Germany), henbane (St Aubin, Switzerland), and umbelliferous seeds (Yverdon, Vaud). But only one kind of herb was found in any box, suggesting amuletic rather than medicinal use.⁴⁹

The going assumption has too often been that no prophetic women really existed in the early “Christian” period. Priestly denunciations prove otherwise. The women are there, being reviled by men like Aldhelm of Malmesbury, who have nothing useful to say about them. Writing around the year 700, he inveighed against the “empty gibberish of falsity from talkative prophetesses and soothsayers.”⁵⁰ This English abbot was obsessed with degrees of sexual purity—and with stamping out heathen culture, which as yet remained barely touched by the royal decrees of conversion.

The clergy showed contempt, but they also projected their fear. Before long, priestly opposition had pushed the meaning of “sorcery” toward illicit and harmful magic. Early medieval capitularies were already assigning negative meanings to *sorciarius* / *sorciaria* (“sorcerer”).⁵¹ This trend would only accelerate with time.

CHANT, INVOCATION AND CHARMS

Incantation was called *galdr* in Norse. The witch-name *galdrakona* referred specifically to a woman who chanted. From a related word in Saxon, *galdor*, came names for the *galstre* or *gealdricge* / *galdriggei*: (female) “enchanter.” The cognate in Middle High German, *galster*, meant “spoken magic, spell.”⁵² The Anglo-Saxon *wyrtgælstre* was an “herb-chanter.” Through their voice and breath and words, the chanting women brought spirit to bear on matter, and by infusing it with consciousness, caused transformation.

The Latin *incantation* means “singing into,” invoking through chant, from *canto*, “song, chant.” The clergy sometimes called witches by the Latin title of *incantatrix*, which gave rise to French *enchanteresse* and, in turn, to English *enchantress*. Church councils were constantly prohibiting the singing of charms. They usually included divinations alongside incantations, as the council of Clovesho did in 750.⁵³ Also in England, Theodore’s Penitential prescribed penance for “a woman [who] performs diabolical [sic] incantations or divinations,” as well as for any who observe “omens from birds, or dreams, or any divinations according to the custom of the heathen.”⁵⁴ Authors of penitential books were doing their damndest to stamp out the *incantatores* and *praecantatores* to which people flocked for healing, protection, and other blessings. These witches did more than chant; they gave counsel, and with it healing and protective remedies, in the form of

herbs, amulets, knotted ties, and other medicine objects.⁵⁵

The woman enchants, the serpent enchants

Back in the 5th century, Caesarius of Arles singled out female *incantatrices*, warning Christians (men specifically) not to seek them out for healing or prophecy. He declared it was better for a man “if he does not send for a soothsayer, if he does not make bindings, he does not admit any enchantresses. The woman enchants, the serpent enchants.”⁵⁶ That misogynist trope is foundational priestcraft, in the stamp of the church patriarchs. But it is a commentary on a real female sphere of power.

As Bernadette Filotas summarizes from English and Frankish sources, “enchantment was typically the practice of women.” And they performed it for female purposes, which included weaving, conception and contraception, birth, spells of love and of protection from men. For example, the Pseudo-Egbert penitential condemns Anglo-Saxon women for using incantations to conceive.⁵⁷

The *carminatrix* was named from *carmen*, another Latin word for “song.” From it descends French *charme*, and in turn the English *charm* and *charm-er*. These medieval names referred to women who chanted healing verse and performed ritual cures. In Spanish such women were called *ensalmadoras*, a name that implies they used Christian prayers in their chants. Germans called them *segencærinne*, “signers,” for the gestures they made over people.⁵⁸

*Anglo-Saxon
birth charm
(with serpents!)
in the Lacnunga,
a compendium of
medical remedies,
circa 1000 CE.*

D a p p y t e g r e a f w a t t y 7 p o
 m a n e a l i t a m n e m n a d 7 e a c
 o n a n g l i c h a e d a d r e p a r a s
 m o r y u m .

D i n n e d d r a n s l i t e g e m m
 h y p p e y t e l e a y d e g r a s
 w a t t y n e m n e d e n u c a o n p e
 t e p e l e g e o h a e p u n d e h e o
 p p a m a d . 7 p a e g a p o f g e m m d .

In modern Irish, *cailleach phiseogach* is a common name for an old sorceress who works spells or charms.⁵⁹

The word “spell” itself originally meant “speak, tell” (Old English *spellian*, Anglo-French *espeller*, Old French *espelir*: “mean, signify, explain, interpret”).⁶⁰ The meanings of these words stretched over time, so that a German source used *carmen* to mean amulet, from something that was sung over.⁶¹ This kind of semantic drift is common. English “charming” referred to love spells, but now means “attractive.”

In Ireland, incantation figured prominently in the druidic arts. It was a means of attaining *imbas forosnai*, the “wisdom that illumines,” and also of revealing it. The *Táin Bó Cuailnge* shows Fedelm chanting a long prophecy to Medb of Connaught. Nora Chadwick saw this state of inspiration as having originally been “the special métier of women.”

One of the old sources she mentions is the lost *Druim Snechta*. One of its surviving fragments says that the British witch Scáthach practiced *imbas forosnai*. Other sources describe *imbas* as “a process of revelation brought on by a mantic sleep.”⁶²

Imbas was classed with two other arts, both involving incantation. In the first, *teinm laida*, “illumination of song,” inspiration comes through chanting, a signature of shamanic ecstasy. One source says that *teinm laida* belongs to the fourteen streams of poetry. *Teinm* is thought to derive from *tep-*, “heat,” the same root as Sanskrit *tapas*, which is commonly used to describe intensive spiritual practices.

According to the Prologue to the *Senchas Mór*, different kinds of offerings were made for *imbas forosnai* and *teinm laida*. These “heathen rites” were the reason that Patrick abolished them, “for neither *teinm laida* nor *imbas forosnai* could be performed without the accompaniment of heathen offerings.”⁶³ Laws of Patrick and his successors abolished these two forms of *fi-lidecht* (seership). And they admonish Irish kings not to consult with druids



*The Moylough Belt Shrine
(detail) 8th century Ireland*

or “pythonesses.”⁶⁴

Around 900, the *Sanas Cormaic* concurred that such arts were considered too pagan to be permitted. Only *dichetal do chennaib* was allowed to continue under Christianity. The phrase is variously translated as “to chant in prophetic strains,” as “poetry from the head,” or “chanting from the bones.”⁶⁵ It was also described as “a declaration from the ends of his bones at once.”

Early sources hint that *dichetal do chennaib* involved moving the fingertips in gestures.⁶⁶ One writer associates it with “chanting by means of the hazels of prophecy,” apparently referring to divinatory wands.⁶⁷ This fragment calls to mind the hazelnuts of Wisdom that fall into the Well of Segais, at the source of the Boyne, where they turn the bellies of the salmon purple. This fountain was sought out in hopes of attaining illumination.

LEODRÛNAN

Anglo-Saxons called the chanting witch *leóð-rûne* or *leóth-rûne*, “song mysteries.”

Leóð means song, poetry, verse,⁶⁸ compare with Old High German *leod* (modern

Lied) Irish *lóid*, Scots *laoidh*, “song, poem,” French *lai* and English *lay*, medieval words for a longpoem.⁶⁹ There was also *leoducraeft*, the power or skill of chant. Anglo-Saxon lexicographers marked the pagan underpinnings of *leóð-rûne*: “Cockayne translates the word ‘heathen charm,’” according to Toller-Bosworth, who also translates *fondien leódrunen* as undertaking “incantations.”⁷⁰ Christine Fell reads *leod-rune* as a variant of the poetic Old English *leoðurun* (“sung mystery”).⁷¹ Alaric Hall concurs, “*Leoðurun* denotes holy mysteries and the Middle English *leodrune* prophecies...”⁷² But this important word was choked out by persecutory stigma (see Chapter 5).

Charmers cured by knotting hanks of colored thread, and by laying on hands, or touching with stones. Some invoked the Nine Maidens, common in healing spells across northern Europe. Audrey Meaney refers to an Old English charm invoking the Nothðæs (Needs), who are Nine Sisters, and compares it to a Danish runic inscription on a pine wand, in which the Nine Needs (*nouthær*) lying on a black stone out on the sea chase away a fever.⁷³ These Need-names might relate to invocation of the Norns, going by two lines in the *Sigrdrífumál*. The valkyrie Sigrdrífa recommends that runes should be cut “on the nail of the Norn” and “mark your nail with nauð” (the Need-rune).⁷⁴

In an early modern Scottish witch trial, Bessie Smith said that she

“charmed the heartfevers” by invoking “the nine maidens that died in the boortree in the Ladywell Bank,” and giving her patients wayburn leaf to eat for nine mornings.⁷⁵ “Boortree” is a name for the elder, a tree rich in the goddess lore of Britain, Denmark and Holland, also evoked by “Ladywell.”

The Gauls and Old Irish ascribed powers of incantation to women, using nearly identical phrases. A rare Gaulish inscription found in a tomb at Larzac, France, refers to a sisterhood of enchantresses (*uidlua*). It is a charm inscribed on a lead plaque, with the phrase *bnannom bricto*, “women’s spell.” Historical linguist Yves Lambert derives the spell-name *bricto* from the Indo-European root **bhregh*, “to declare solemnly.”⁷⁶

The Gaulish phrase *Bnannom bricto* has an exact Irish correlate—*brichta ban*—in the *Liber Hymnorum*. This text, attributed to St. Patrick but dating centuries after his time, is itself a spell. It is a counter-charm by a Christian monk who directed his chant “Against the spells of women, of smiths and druids.”⁷⁷

women’s spells

Gaulish: *bnannom bricto*

(Plomb de Larzac)

Irish: *brichta ban*

(Liber Hymnorum)

AGAINST THE SPELLS OF WOMEN, SMITHS AND DRUIDS.

Medieval bishops and canon lawyers attempted to wipe out the peasantry’s use of incantations for vision, blessing, healing, and protection, because those chants had traditionally invoked pagan deities—and because the priesthood now arrogated the chanting of litanies to men alone. The priest singing Mass is performing an incantation that is supposed to magically transform wine and wafer into the body of his god. But the Church claimed that power of enchanting only for a doctrinally restricted brotherhood, denying it to females or people of ecstatic spiritual traditions. Its hierarchy forbade the *incantatrix* to practice the universal human sacrament of invoking Spirit. It slandered the pagan European chants (and sometimes even christianized ones with pagan elements) as devilish. If the Night Chant of the Diné or the Maori Creation Chant had existed in Europe, they would have attempted to ban them just as they did the enchantment of European wisewomen. And, eventually, that is what they did.

HEALING WITCHES

Many witch-titles have to do with medicine and healing. Some mean “herb-woman,” like the Frankish *herbaria* and Spanish *herbolera*, both of which were demonized early on. The *Lex Alamanorum* gives “herbalist” as a synonym for “witch,” in its most negative sense: *stria aut herbaria*. *Stria* (from Latin *strix*, “screech-owl”) was a primary Roman name, also demonized, for “witch.” The priests often rendered “herbalist” as *venefica*, “poisoner,” following old Roman patterns of vilification and demonization.⁷⁸ In eastern Europe, Orthodox missionaries engaged in the same vilification, using other epithets. The Greek priest St Cyril rebuked his Slavic parishoners for going in illness to healers he called “accursed women.”⁷⁹

But the witch-herbalist knew of plants for sickness and binding up wounds, for childbirth and purifying the blood. She brewed herbs and roots to make healing drinks, made salves, and combined these medicines with ceremonial acts, in what is now known as “wholistic healing.” She used knotting on cords, healing belts, rubbing with stones, healing touch, and herbal smudges.⁸⁰ She gathered herbs to bless houses and barns, burned or scattered them, hung wreaths over doors and beams; and tied blessing plants around the necks of cows and other animals.

Penitential books are full of references to people using *ligaturas* (ties) for healing and protection, or wearing bundles of herbs, bones or pieces of iron, as pendants, tied on or sewn into clothing.⁸¹ The *Homilia de Sacrilegis* gives a long list of illnesses and physical problems that were treated by “songs and incantations,” and by various folk remedies, such as hanging amulets such as the “serpent’s tongue” around a person’s neck.⁸²

In Germanic languages, treatment through touch, stroking, and making passes over the body was sometimes called “bettering”: Anglo-Saxon *bētan*, Middle Dutch *böten*, and Old German *puozan* all meant “to remedy, heal.”⁸³ Jacob Grimm stated in the early 1800s, “Among our peasantry there are old women still who profess *böten*, stroking, pouring, and charming by spells.”⁸⁴

The Welsh had a constellation of words based on the same concept. *Swynaw* meant “to comfort or cure; to charm; to bless; to save harmless,” and also “preserve”; *swynawg*, “possessed of a preserving virtue”; and *swynedigaeth*, “the act of preserving or remedying by some hidden virtue; a preserving by charm.” A woman who did this was called a *darswynws*.⁸⁵

The witches often treated people through animist ceremonies: laying healing stones on sick bodies, passing children through openings in the earth, or by immersions into south-running water. Modern Scottish healers tied black and white thread around the limbs of afflicted people or animals.⁸⁶ Silesian Germans consulted old women called *messengerin*, who took their measure with thread, from head to toe and across their outstretched fingertips, to cure consumption.⁸⁷



Healing with a serpent stone, Hungary, mid-20th century. (After Dömötör)

These shamanic arts did not fade away of their own accord. They were much in demand, and in spite of centuries of repression, they persisted. In birth magic, for example, women used “herbal or animal remedies, amulets, girdle [belt], charms and invocations, physical manipulation and various rites relating to springs and stones.”⁸⁸ The stones could be large boulders or rock “beds” in which women who desired to conceive a child would lie, or small stones that could be tied on the mother’s body, or used in other ways.

Herbal mysteries were the province of the Old English *lybbestre* and Old German *luppararā*, “female healer.”⁸⁹ These words for healing witches descend from *lyb* and *luppa*, which both mean “vitality,” “medicine.”⁹⁰ It designates “medicine” both in the sense of curative herbs or powders, and as something animated by sacred power. *Lyb* is related to the word “life” itself. The Anglo-Saxon verb *libban* (*lybban*) means “to live, be, exist.”⁹¹

The Icelandic cognate *lyf* could mean either a healing plant, or some other spirit power.⁹² Modern explanations define *lib* / *lyb* as “something medicinal and potent, a harmful or powerful drug, φάρμακον.”⁹² There is a special irony to translators’ using the word “drug,” and even “poison,” rather than “medicine,” to translate *lyb*,⁹³ which meant “life.” The negative charge laid on these heathen terms dies very hard.

So *lybbestre* translates as “woman who works with life-force,” or

“medicine-woman.” Many spiritual concepts of the Anglo-Saxons sprang from the etymological matrix of *lyb*. *Lyfja* meant “to heal.” *Lybcræft* was the wisdom of witch-herbalists, who supplemented their pharmacological knowledge with transformative and protective magic.⁹⁵ Cognate words existed in Old German: *lupperie* “medicine, healing,” *luppærinne*, “sorceress” and, later, *lublerin*, “female healer.”⁹⁶

Amulets crafted from herbs, animal claws, crystal, amber and other essence-filled things, were called *lybesn*, *lyfesna*, or *lybesa*.⁹⁷ This word also encompassed the meaning of “offering” and “favorable omen,” as implied by the Latin gloss *strena*.⁹⁸ *Lybcorn* (“healing grain”) referred to medicinal seeds, especially purgatives like euphoriba or spurge or hellebore.⁹⁹ *Lybcorn* leaves were also given in an herbal compound for people suffering from mental illness.¹⁰⁰

gloss

a translator’s
explanation,
comparison

Another word in this magical set was *lyblac*, which derives from *lyb-láca*, an Old English word for “doctoring” (later *leech*).¹⁰¹ It had a Gothic cognate, *lubjaleisei*, which was glossed in Greek as *φαρμακεία* (*pharmakeia*).¹⁰² (We only know of *lubjaleisei* because it was preserved in an early translation of Galatians 5:20, in which Paul denounces “the acts of the flesh,” among them “idolatry and witchcraft.”)¹⁰³ Both *lyblac* and *φαρμακεία* had an herbalist genealogy but were turned into general terms for witchcraft, acquiring an increasingly pejorative sense as time passed. *Lāchenærinne*, “female healer,” the Middle German cognate of English *læca*, also took on the meaning of “enchantress.”¹⁰⁴

Because of its pagan dimensions, *lyblac* met with hostility from the Anglo-Saxon priesthood, who loaded it with negative connotations. So it came to be defined as “sorcery, witchcraft, the art of using drugs or potions for the purpose of poisoning, or for magical purposes.”¹⁰⁵ In the same way, *lifesne* (consecrated things) are denounced in the same breath as “incantations or amulets or other hidden devil-crafts.”¹⁰⁶

The Anglo-Saxon preacher Aelfric chastised those who suffered an illness “and who then seeks health by forbidden practices, or in accursed incantations, or by any witchcraft.”¹⁰⁷ Elsewhere he wrote, “Nor ought a Christian man to enquire from the foul witch about his health...” The priest acknowledged that she might be able to speak truths, but insisted that they

came from the devil.¹⁰⁸ Priestly literature not only demonized folk religion, but disparaged its adherents, calling them “ignorant,” “uncouth,” “stupid,” “the rabble,” or “worthless women.”¹⁰⁹

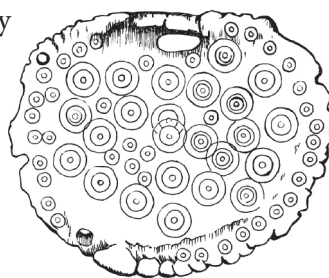
Ultimately, the *lyb* witch-word survived in Anglo-Saxon only through a shadow-word that was its grammatical negation. In his denunciation of sorcerers and enchanters, archbishop Wulfstan of York names *unlybwyrtan*, literally “unlife-workers.”¹¹⁰ No attestations survive for *lybwyrtan*, the positive word on which this term was based—an absence that speaks volumes. A direct parallel is seen in the German transformation of *die holden*, “the beneficent” (female) to *die unholden*, which demonologists introduced as a word for “witch” in the 1400s. But older names persisted, like the Anglo-Saxon *wortcunning*, “herb-knowledge,” at least for a while.

From Norway comes a measure of how wide and deep the *lyb* /*lyfja* concept must have been in Common Germanic. *Lyf* is given as a Norse word for magical drugs as late as the early 1300s.¹¹¹ It survives in an anathema against “herbs, runes, and enchantment” (*lif runir oc galldra*) in witchcraft statutes issued by a Norwegian archbishop of Niðaróss.¹¹² In Norwegian, *lif* seems to have specialized into an herbal meaning, while in Anglo-Saxon it turned toward “amulet” or “charm.”

In Icelandic, *lif* appears as the *Lyfjaberg*, the “Hill of Healing,” a female sanctuary where the goddess Menglöd sits with her Nine Maidens:¹¹³

*it is called lyfjaberg, and has long
brought joy to the sick and suffering.
she will become whole, though gravely ill,
every woman who climbs it.*¹¹⁴

Luppa also continued to be used in Central Europe, as shown by Swiss churchmen’s prohibitions in a Zurich MS dated 1393: “You shall not believe in magic nor in magic ointment [*luppe*] nor in witchcraft [*hesse*] nor in magic cure [*lachene*], nor in fire gazing [*für sehen*], nor in measuring for healing, nor in the night women [*naht frowen*] nor in the cry of the



*Antler pendant,
Friesland, Netherlands*

magpie, nor in the twitching of the eyebrows and cheeks [as omens], nor even in the magic herb betony. All this is unbelief.”¹¹⁵ All this was *folk* belief, folk remedies, omens and divination.

In Old High German too, the meaning of *luppi* was turned inside out, directly reversed from “healing” to “poisonous.” The same negative shift occurred with the Latin word *potio*, “a drink,” which became specialized into “herbal brew,” then torqued into the French word “poison,” whence it was adopted into English.

In spite of her connection with life and healing, priestly writers often called the medicine witch *venefica*, Latin for “poisoner.”¹¹⁶ By early medieval times *venefica* had acquired the connotation of “sorceress.” Thus Herard of Tours capped his 8th century listing of sorcerers, diviners, enchanters, and dream-readers with “the sorcery (*veneficis*) of women who invent various wonders.”¹¹⁷ Not all scribes agreed that herbalists were harmdoers; in two texts *veneficus* was emended to *beneficus*, “one who is beneficent.”¹¹⁸

The use of *venefica* for herbalists and healers was stoked by the clergy’s campaign to brand contraceptive users and providers as murderers and “poisoners.” They used this staining epithet often.¹¹⁹ Early European penitential books give abundant evidence of this distortion, which continued in the slander of midwives as babykillers in the 1400s, most famously in the *Malleus Maleficarum*.

From the 9th century on, the priesthood tried to scare people with the spectre of *maleficia*—harmful sorcery. But some of their writings reveal that the common people saw witch-herbalists as healers, and continued to consult them as their physicians and all-round life advisors, throughout the middle ages. In Scandinavia, “magical healers, especially women” were active from the Viking age up into the 20th century.¹²⁰

One of Aelfric’s sermons groups together three elements of women’s witchcraft abhorred by the clergy: animistic child-blessings and healings; contraception and abortion; and female love potions. “Likewise some witless women go to cross-roads, and draw their children through the earth, and thus commit themselves and their children to the devil. Some of them kill their children before they are born, or after birth, that they may not be discovered, nor their wicked adultery be betrayed ... Some of them devise

drinks [philtres] for their wooers, or some mischief, that they may have them in marriage.”¹²¹ Assuming that married women never needed contraception, the abbot preferred to make the punitive claim that birth control was nothing but a way for women to hide evidence of their love affairs.

*they bring their offerings to earth-fast stone,
and also to trees and to wellsprings,
as the witches teach...*

The Latin penitential of Halitgar of Cambrai inveighed against animist ceremonies (in the usual masculine default): “Some men are so blind that they bring their offerings to earth-fast stone and also to trees and to wellsprings, and will not understand how stupidly they act or how this dead stone or that dumb tree might help them or give them health when these things themselves are never able to move from their place.” This condemnation of animist offerings at stones, trees, and springs was a standard priestly formula used in church councils and penitential texts.

But an 11th century Anglo-Saxon translator contextualized the passage by adding to it this revealing phrase: *swa wiccan tæcað* (“as the witches teach”).¹²² His commentary emphasizes that the Anglo-Saxons still understood “witches” within the context of pagan ceremony, and it underlines the animist reverence of the witches for Earth, trees, and water.

The Austrian bishop Arno of Salzburg complained that people preferred folk healers and animist shrines to doctors and church. They dealt with plague and animal disease by going to “wicked men and women, seeresses, sorceresses and enchanters.”¹²³ The English monk Cuthbert denounced “the false remedies of idolatry, as though they could ward off a blow inflicted by God the Creator by means of incantations or amulets or any other mysteries of devilish art.”¹²⁴

All this looks very different from the wisewoman’s perspective. The herb woman chanted to the plants she found, invoking their powers and virtues. Old English had a specialized name, *wyrtgælstre*, for the “woman who chants over herbs.”¹²⁵ But this sole attestation for the *wyrtgælstre*, dated around 1050 CE, appears in a menacing context: “a girl born on the fifth day of the moon will die worst, for she will be a witch and an enchantress with herbs (Lat. *herbaria*; OE *wyrtgælstre*.)”¹²⁶

Herb-chanting also is mentioned in an Anglo-Saxon remedy against “ælf-sickness.” It explains “how one must sing over the plants before one picks them; and also how one must put those plants under an altar and sing over them...”¹²⁷

Early medieval priestly literature is full of prohibitions of pagan herb-chanting, from Martin of Braga (Portugal), Eligius of Noyon (Belgium), the Theodore penitential (England), Regino of



Healer infuses healing energy into a herbal potion, with her mortar and pestle in the foreground.

Prum and Burchard of Worms (Germany), and the *Medicina Antiqua*.¹²⁸ An 8th century sermon forbids incantation over herbs;¹²⁹ so does Burchard’s German penitential, circa 1015: “Hast thou collected medicinal herbs with evil incantations, not with the creed and the Lord’s Prayer...?”¹³⁰

Healers also sang incantations over medicinal or blessing potions, as a condemnation in the *Homilia de Sacrilegiis* tells us.¹³¹ The author intones that such people are “not Christian, but pagan.” Meanwhile, priests everywhere threw up their hands and invented their own christianized charms to replace the pagan ones—often modeled upon them.

In spite of their polemical tone, priestly sources demonstrate that gathering herbs was a spiritual act to pagan Europeans. Their use in blessing and protection was not restricted to witches. The common people gathered certain plants at the new or full or waning moon, or at dawn, midday, sunset, midnight, or on the ancient holidays such as Midsummers Eve. It was customary to approach the plant reverently, ceremonially asking its

permission to cut or uproot it. Some placed offerings of grain or honey before it, or into the ground where they dug. Hungarians gathered the shamanic herb belladonna after offering bread, salt, and spices.¹³²

Such herb-gathering rites survived in modern Romania. The *babele mestere* (“skilled old women”) set out quietly at dawn to gather mandrake that they had previously “destined” for harvest by tying on a red ribbon. After digging up the earth around the plant, the wisewomen removed it, laid it on the ground and placed food and drink around it. They spoke a charm: “I give you bread and salt | It is for you to give me strength and health”; or they simply said, “So that you will cure me.” The women shared a meal while embracing and caressing each other. Then they discussed the person the mandrake was for, and how it would help them.¹³³

On Midsummers Eve young Rumanian women would go out to search for the *cusitza* creeper. They tied red yarn on their finds, and hid the plant under green leaves. Then they drew water from three fountains. Before dawn on Midsummer’s Day, they dressed in their finest, gathered the vines, twined them around their heads, and went door to door singing and making merry. In the evening they carried out a divination using the jug of water collected from the three springs.¹³⁴

Many herbal invocations took the form of praise-songs: “Good day, holy plant *pivoine*, you are queen of the plants.” The medieval French honored the peony (*pivoine*) in what one writer called “a veritable cult.”¹³⁵ Transylvanians used to greet the belladonna plant every morning, calling her *Nagyasszony*, “great lady,” and paid similar honors to vervain.¹³⁶ The Gauls had highly esteemed vervain for their rites, as Pliny observed, and modern French herbalists continued to relate to it in a ceremonial manner.

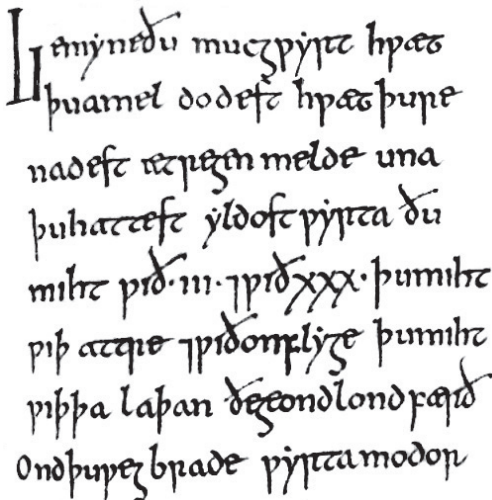
As recently as a century ago, Jacques Esquirol accompanied a Lyonnaise witch on her search for vervain on March 21. (The herb was said to be most potent on the spring equinox.) After much wandering, the herbalist suddenly cried out and knelt before a clump of vervain. She began to move, sighing, speaking and praying, and only after that did she gather the plant.¹³⁷ This approach to plants aligns with Siberian shamanism and North American medicine ways.

The Anglo-Saxon *wyrtaelstre* would have sung incantations something like those in the “Nine Herbs Charm,” a series of plant-spirit invocations to mugwort, plantain, nettle, camomile, fennel and other herbs. A 10th-century

priest recorded these pagan chants in a medical compendium called the *Lacnunga*. Though he mixed in names of the christian god, that of Wodan remains too, and the outlines of an older cosmology are still perceptible. The charm addresses plants as living powers, and foremost among them is *Artemisia*:

Remember, mugwort, what you made known,
 what you arranged at the great proclamation.
 you were called una, oldest of herbs.
 you have power for three and against thirty,
 you have power against poison and infection,
 you have power against the loathsome foe
 roving through the land.¹³⁸

Mugwort is a relative of North American desert sage, and closely related to the herb burned in Chinese medicinal moxibustion. On all three continents, the local form of *Artemisia* was revered for its power to bless and remove negative energy, disharmony and disease; and to purify and protect from danger. Pliny referred to the ancient belief that Artemis had revealed this herb, which even now retains the botanical name *Artemisia*.¹³⁹



 I anýnedu mucspýrte hƿæt
 þuamæl doðeƿe hƿæt þuƿe
 naðeƿe ætƿeƿm mælde una
 þuhatteƿe ýlðoƿe ƿýrta ðu
 miht ƿið·iii· ƿið·xxx· þumiht
 ƿiþ ætƿe ƿiðomflýge þumiht
 ƿiþþa laþan ðeƿeondlonðƿe
 onðþuƿeƿe brade ƿýrta modor

*Invocation to Mugwort, "oldest of herbs,"
 in the Nine Herbs Charm, Lacnunga,
 10th century England*

Around the year 870, German carvers of an ivory gospel cover showed Mother Earth holding a horn-shaped basket of herbs. Roman influence would suggest that acanthus is shown, but it is plausibly mugwort, whose leaves are similarly shaped.¹⁴⁰ (See chapter 7, pp. 255 and 257.) Mugwort was said to reach its greatest power on the summer solstice. It was among the nine sacred herbs that peasant celebrants offered to the Midsummer bonfires,

and which they brought home after the dancing to safeguard the household until next year's summer solstice.¹⁴¹ It is likely to have been one of the herbs that Breton soothsayers used to lustrate houses in the mid-9th-century. Frankish authorities also list "fumigators" (*suffitores*) among pagan practitioners during the same period.¹⁴²

Russians told a thoroughly shamanistic tale about mugwort, which carried the secret name *Chernobyl* ("black one"). They said that a girl went searching for mushrooms in the old oak forest of Starodubsk. She saw a group of serpents curled up, and tried to retreat, but fell into a pit where they lived.

It was dark there, and the snakes were hungry, but their golden-horned queen led them to a luminous stone. Licking it satisfied their hunger. The girl did as they did and remained with them until spring came. Then the snakes made a ladder for her by interlacing their bodies, and she ascended from the underworld. Before they parted, the serpent queen gave the girl the ability to understand the language of plants and to know their medicinal powers. But she warned her never to speak the name of Chernobyl or she would lose her knowledge.

The maiden had this gift until one day a man asked her the name of the plant that grows along the footpaths, and before she realized it she had answered, pronouncing the taboo name of Chernobyl. All her knowledge left her, as the serpent queen's prediction came true. People say that this is where mugwort acquired its other name: Zabytko, "herb of forgetfulness."¹⁴³

Southern Slavs recounted similar stories of dragons or serpent queens who granted second sight to humans who lived in their underground world for seven or nine years. This initiation gave them the power to achieve wealth and to gain knowledge of the dead.¹⁴⁴ The tale of Chernobyl shows that mugwort was held to be very sacred—thus the secrecy around its ritual



Pagan interlace: silverwork from Ryazan, Russia

name—and that knowledge about it was transmitted after an initiation (communion with snakes in the underworld). The admonition to secrecy may also be seen as a reference to the danger of openly espousing the “Old Faith” (старая вера), the Russian name for pagan spirituality.

Just as the initiate must never reveal the name of Chernobyl, Russians gathered a “nameless herb” on the eve of *Kupala*—Midsummers’ Eve. This so happens to be the time when people over many parts of Europe gathered mugwort for ceremony. Celebrants garlanded themselves, their children and animals; hung their homesteads with mugwort; cast it upon bonfires on the high places; and leaped over its smoke. The French made wreaths to wear at festival dances, then threw them into the bonfire along with their sorrows.¹⁴⁵ Russians called the sacred bundle of mugwort *Kupala*, “shower,” from a blessing rite of sprinkling water with it. That byname may have come into use because the real name of mugwort was indeed taboo: sacred.

STAFF-WOMEN, AND OTHER GERMANIC TITLES

Scandinavia lay out of the church fathers’ reach for a long time. The northern countries were not even nominally converted to Christianity until after 1000. As a result, pagan culture survived there in strength, and had many names for the wisewoman and seeress. Old Norse texts refer to the clairvoyant powers of the *spákona*, “prophet-woman.”

She was also called *seiðkona*, a word that has no English equivalent, but connotes “woman of ecstatic ceremony, enchantress.” And she was the *völva*, which means “staff-woman” (from *völ*, “staff”).¹⁴⁶ (The plural of *völva* is *völur*; later sources often use *vala* for the singular.) The ceremonial staff has been used by shamans and medicine women all over the world, from Zimbabwe to Japan to California.¹⁴⁷

The *völva* was the Norse shaman par excellence. She went out on the land, gazing in silence and watching the signs of nature, a practice known as *utiseti*, “sitting out.” She was adept in *seiðr*, a ceremony in which she entered trance at the center of a circle of women. Chanting of *seiðlatri* (trance melodies) fueled her spirit-journey and her inspired prophecy. This induction of trance was called *efla seið*, “fixing magic.”¹⁴⁸ Toward the end of the ceremony the *völva* gave oracular responses to people’s questions. These seeresses roamed the countryside, often travelling with groups of singers.¹⁴⁹

Another major group of sorcery-words come from more southerly Germanic languages: Dutch *toverij*, Old Frisian *tauwerie*, German *Zauber*, and the Old English *teafor*. From the same root came the Flemish *toveresse* and German *Zauberin*, “sorceress.” The Old High German form *zoupar*, in its variant spellings, is glossed as “divination.” Icelandic has various forms including *töfur* (amulet, talisman or other magical object, but also meaning “incantation” and magical “fascination”).¹⁵⁰ A saga describes a seeress as keeping *taufr*, “the instruments for making spells,” in her skin bag, but does not reveal what those might be.¹⁵¹

In Low German, *toverie* was sometimes paired with the *wykke* / *witch* words, as in *tovern und wykken*, or “go about with *toverye* and *wyckerie*”; and similar combinations.¹⁵² Most intriguing is a single Icelandic attestation of *töfranorn*, which looks to be a fate, although the Latin gloss *saga* (“wisewoman”) suggests a living woman.¹⁵³ The witch Búsla invokes the *töfranorn*, along with trolls, *álfar*, and giants, in her protective spell to prevent the saga’s hero from being executed.¹⁵⁴

SHAPESHIFTERS AND SPIRIT FLIGHT

Some names of the witch highlight her shamanic nature, and the transformative powers she worked with. She is described as taking the form of an animal double to make journeys in the spirit. In northern Europe, she often rides upon the wolf, whale, or walrus, her animal spirit helpers. In Greece, the Pythia received power and knowledge from the serpent. The Italian *strix* assumed the form of an owl. If her flight was once revered as the dreamer’s journey, by Roman times she was reviled as a devourer of life-force who stole children and caused people to waste away.¹⁵⁵ This idea was carried over into the Church’s negative interpretation of shamanic ways.

Under Roman rule, the Latin *strix* was adopted into Gaulish culture, becoming the *striga* of Provence and *stria* of the Franks. The loanword imported the negative Roman connotations, which circulated ever more widely in Church Latin pronouncements against *strigae*, *stregonae*, *stregulae*, or *striones*. Only in her Italian homeland, among the peasantry, did the *strega* retain her positive associations with healing and second-sight. In other countries—notably France, early on, and Switzerland and Hungary centuries later—women were persecuted as witches under the imported name of *striga*

or *striges*.

In seventh century Languedoc and in northern Italy, commoners called the witch *masca*, She-of-the-Mask. The Lombard *Lex Rotharii* refers to the burning of women as *mascae*. The law permitted lords to burn women under their rule as witches, but forbade other men to lynch them: “No one should presume to kill the serving-woman of another [man] as witch [*stria*], which they call *masca*...”¹⁵⁶ The word comes from a late Latin term *masca* or *mascara* that entered medieval languages as Italian *talamasca*, Old French *talmache* and *tamasche*, Old Dutch *talmasge*.¹⁵⁷

In the late 7th century, Cilian referred to *Talamascae Litteræ*, “Talamasca characters, or letters,” explaining them thus: “for the hidden things, and the things known only to sorcerers [soothsayers] and to the Talamascas, and to those who are agreed upon the meaning of their characters.”¹⁵⁸ This reference to characters comes very close to Germanic runes.

In Church Latin *talamasca* is given as a synonym for *larva*, which carries the meanings of “mask, double, ghost, shadow, image” and, for theologians, “demon.”¹⁵⁹ Here again there is an overlap between the witch and the dead, with a suggestion that she channeled ancestral spirits, or enacted them in ceremonies. Massimo Centini shows that *talamasca* was connected with “masquerades organized on the day of the dead.” He cites an 882 order by the Frankish bishop Hincmar of Reims: “Do not permit them to do shameful games with bears, nor consent to them going carrying in front of them those masks of demons, which are commonly called *talamascae*.”¹⁶⁰

In medieval German, *talmasca* referred to a masked person. *Tal-* appears to derive from *dalen*, “to whisper, speak in a droll manner, joke.” Centini concludes, “And so Talamasca would be a mask that mumbles or speaks in a strange manner like a spirit or a madman.”¹⁶¹ In the modern folklore of Piemonte, *masca* means “witch” and also “spirits, shadows of the dead.”¹⁶² There it continued to be used as an insult toward women, as “witch,” beyond the middle ages.¹⁶³

Medieval Latin sources used *larva* for spirits, including devouring hag-spirits and night-maras, but also for the dead. Gervase of Tilbury equated *larvae* with the old Greco-Roman *lamias*, “who the common people call *mascae* or in Gallic language *strie*.” He quoted physicians as saying that they are “nocturnal visions that disturb the souls of sleepers, causing oppression.”¹⁶⁴ Interestingly, the Jesuit Gaspar Schott countered this

definition, writing in 1657, “*lamia* and *strix* mean the same thing, namely, *saga* (‘wisewoman’).”¹⁶⁵ *Larva* was used in the first description of the famous witch-mountain Horselberg, in the early 1500s.¹⁶⁶

Masks were once used to invoke ancestors and land spirits. Innumerable canon laws forbade women’s singing and dancing in churchyards, as well as masked ceremonial processions in the guise of stags and old women. Masked dancers and mummers were a common sight on medieval festival days, carried over from wholly pagan origins into a churchified calendar of saints’ names. They survived into the 20th century in Switzerland, Bulgaria, and other remote regions.

A witch named Grima (“Mask”) appears in an Icelandic saga. Her family were Norse from the Hebrides: “All of them were very skilled in magic and were great sorcerers.”¹⁶⁷ The Norse called those who were able to assume another form *hamleipur*.¹⁶⁸ Alone among the gods, the witch Freyja possesses the shamanic *fyðrhamr*, “feather-form,” a magical cloak that gave her the power to fly over the lands. Eddic poetry does not elaborate on this; the only mention of it is when she loans her witch-cloak to the trickster Loki.¹⁶⁹

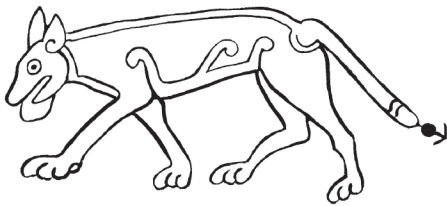
Many Celtic goddesses took the form of bears, wild pigs, deer and especially ravens, the allies of the prophetess. Flidais, the Irish goddess of wild animals, drove a chariot drawn by deer (as Artemis also had). The Scottish *glaisteag* oversaw, protected, and dealt out fates to the deer, and had deer feet herself. She punished hunters who were disrespectful to the deer. The Morrigan took many forms, but especially that of a crow or raven. Shape-shifting swan-cloaked women appear in Celtic lays and Germanic faery tales. Valkyries also sometimes took this form. Goddesses and *dísir* (female ancestors) take the form of *fylgjur*, apparitions that guide, warn, and protect. (See Chapter 6.) If analogies to other world traditions hold, these ancestral beings would also act as spirit helpers.

Folk tradition held that some people inherited or were divinely gifted with the shamanic power of shapeshifting. Around 1015 bishop Burchard of Worms asked in his penitential book if people believe “that those who are commonly called the Fates exist,” or that when a person is being born, “they are able even then to determine his life to what they wish, so that... he can be transformed into a wolf, that which vulgar folly calls a werewolf, or into any other shape.”¹⁷⁰

The old Irish believed that people of certain clans possessed the power to

take the form of wolves when they wished. One source reports that in the year 690 a wolf was heard speaking with a human voice.¹⁷¹ Several centuries later, Giraldus Cambrensis recounted how “a monk wandering in a forest came upon two wolves, one of whom was dying. The other entreated him to give the dying wolf the last sacrament... [and] tore the skin from the breast of the dying wolf, laying bare the form of an old woman.” Afterwards the monk worried that it was sinful to give the sacrament to such a being—was she human or animal?¹⁷²

A more orthodox version of this story says that a priest traveling through the woods in Meath was accosted by a man who asked him to confess his sick wife. The priest saw nothing but a wolf lying on the ground, and turned to flee. The wolf and her husband calmed his fears, and he performed the rite. Thinking that the wolf-woman might possess prophetic insight because of her shamanic form, he asked her about the English who were then invading Ireland. The wolf answered that God was punishing the Irish for their sins.¹⁷³ In this way, pagan traditions of shapeshifting were turned to the service of Christian moralizing; but the story also bears witness to how shapeshifting was linked to spiritual vision.



Female wolf, Book of Kells, Ireland

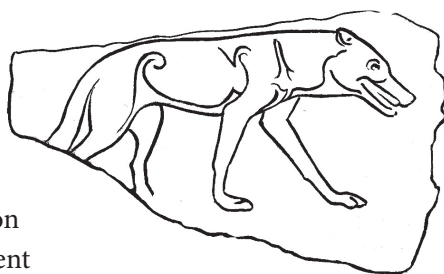
category was the wandering woman “who goes off with *síd*-folk”—with the faeries.¹⁷⁴ (This is a prime metaphor for Otherworld journeys in Ireland; as late as the 1880s, faery doctors like Biddy Early and Máire Ni Murchú were still understood as journeying to faery realms.)¹⁷⁵

The third kind of disapproved woman, “the sharp-tongued virago,” was the female satirist.¹⁷⁶ She was seen as a kind of sorceress, whose words had the power to raise up blisters on a deserving target. Male satirists had this same power, but the legal codes did not socially penalize—or demonize—them for it. Tribal Irish society was not as sex-egalitarian as is often claimed. The suppression of sharp female social critique would have been a pivotal

A strong cultural expectation that wolf-witches were female seems to have prevailed in Ireland. One of three categories of women penalized with reduced compensation for wrongs in the *Bretha Crólige* was “the woman who likes to stray in wolf-shapes.” A second

change in Irish culture.

Folk tradition knows of spells called *fith-fath* or *fath-fith*, with the power to make a person invisible, to shift shapes, or to change things into different forms. Many Irish tales turn on transformations of this kind. Eithne went through many such changes after being cursed by her husband's first wife. But transformations resulting from a curse are a different matter than shapeshifting in ecstatic connection with spirit beings.



*Female wolf on Pictish stone,
Ardross, Scotland*

A hag riding on a giant white wolf was said to have stopped the Danish invasion of England under Harald Hardrada in 1066. A man named Gyth dreamed that a great witch stood on the island, opposing the king's fleet with a fork and a trough. Tord dreamed that "before the army of the people of the country was riding a huge witch-wife upon a wolf, and she tossed the invading soldiers into its mouth."¹⁷⁷

Witches were famous for allying with animal guardians or helpers, especially ravens, wolves, snakes or dragons. During the early modern witch hunts, witches' doubles and spirit "familiar" were most often pictured as cats, toads, bats and hares, or occasionally foxes or birds. Witches were said to turn into wolves or bears in Savoyard witch trials as late as the 1700s.¹⁷⁸ Shapeshifting and consorting with animal spirits became stock accusations of the witch hunters, and in later persecutions up to the 20th century. Already around 1235 Etienne Bourbon was recording a French belief that wolf-riding old women (*striges*) killed babies.¹⁷⁹

In the old lore, witches and goddesses ride on dream-animals: wolves, horses, goats, or geese. The Norse poetic kennings for wolf called it "the troll-woman's steed" and "the dusky stallion on which the Night-Farer goeth."¹⁸⁰ In their dream-journeys, witches attain foreknowledge of the unseen, of what is yet to come. The word used in the *Helgakviða—trollkona*—can mean a spirit, or a witch:

*a witch woman on wolf did ride in the gloaming...
full well saw she that soon would fall
sigrínn's son on sigarsvellir.*¹⁸¹



Wolf-rider stone at Hunnestad, Sweden, in the 1600s. All but two of seven stones were later smashed.

A trollwoman mounted on a wolf was carved on a second-century runic stone at Hunnestad in Skåne, Sweden. She has often been compared to the supernatural Hyrrokin in Snorri's Edda. When the Aesir called her from Jötunheim to aid them, she came riding on a wolf with serpents for reins.¹⁸² An old manuscript shows a witch riding on a wolf bridled with snakes.¹⁸³ In the Balkans, the *vila* (faery woman) rides a seven-year old stag bridled with snakes.¹⁸⁴

Another term for shamanic flight was *gandreid*, "staff-ride." *Gandr* also signifies a helping spirit, enchantment or magic. *Fostbraethra saga* describes a spirit journey by Thordís of

Löngueness in Greenland. She had slept fitfully, tossing and turning; when she awoke, she told her son she had gone on a long ride on a *gand* through the heavens "and now I know the destiny of those of whom I knew nothing before."¹⁸⁵ Here again, as with the troll-woman riding a wolf in *Helgakviða*, a journey in the spirit reveals the future and hidden things.

*now i know the destiny of those
of whom i knew nothing before.*

The *gandreid* evokes the familiar image of witches riding on the broomstick, or on distaffs or oven-forks. The *völva* carried a ceremonial staff that was apparently understood as conveying her on journeys through the worlds, like the horse-staff of some Siberian shamans. Its equivalent is the witch's wand, whose potency is dramatized by its omnipresence in European

faerie tales. The witch waves her wand, points it, or transforms a person or object by touching them with it. The Irish *luirgean* and Scottish *slachdán* were magical staves or wands that transformed what they struck. Even brooms figure as animated magical objects in Spanish tales of witchcraft, like the distaffs in French and Sardinian lore.

The Night-Farer's name is very old, predating the Germanic migrations: Old German *naht-fara*, *naht-frouwa*, *naht-rita*; Anglo-Saxon *niht-geŋge*; Old Norse *myrk-ritha* ("rider in the dark, the murk") or *qveld-ritha* or *trollritha*.¹⁸⁶ Because the witch hunts have so thoroughly ingrained the idea that darkness is evil, these names have a sinister ring to modern ears.

The Scandinavian *völva* was known both as "night-farer" and *spáfarar*, "prophetic traveller, a term that is known from 13th century Icelandic laws prohibiting witchcraft."¹⁸⁷ No one could ask for a clearer reference to the shaman's journey. The repressive context for that single attestation of *spáfarar* parallels that of Anglo-Saxon *wyrtgælstre*. But the propitious evening star was also called *nahtfara*.¹⁸⁸

FROM HAGEDISSE TO HEXE

Another group of Germanic witch-names carried the double sense of a woman who traveled in the spirit, and also of an ancestor or supernatural crone. The name in Old High German was variously recorded as *hagedisse*, *hagazussa*, *hegizissa*, *hegitisse*, and *haghtessen*. In Anglo-Saxon the word was *hægtesse* or *hagtis*; in medieval Dutch *hagetisse* or *haghdisse*. Over long usage these words gradually contracted, in German to *hazus*, *hazusa*, *hazasa*. In Middle High German the word was already sliding into *hegxse* or *hexse*, in Swiss to *hagsch* or *hezze*, and in English to *hægesse* or *haetse*.¹⁸⁹ It's important to understand that these terms referred to female spirits, Otherworld beings, possibly ancestors, as well as to the witches who invoked them.

The etymologists say that the deep meaning of *haga* / *hæg* / *hæg* is "hedge, border, boundary." Old English *haga* meant "enclosed area," often a homestead or house.¹⁹⁰ (It is related to the *haw* in hawthorn—originally *hagathorn*—a tree with strong faery associations.) So *hagazussa* signified "hedge-woman" or "fence-woman," a liminal being who is a boundary-traveler.¹⁹¹ She "courses between the worlds."¹⁹²

The *hagazussa* is related to the *tunriða*, "hedge-riders" or "gate-riders"

that Oðinn sees flying in the sky and tries to bring down.¹⁹³ The *tunriða* had a German counterpart in the *zunritha*, a term “used of witches and ghosts.”¹⁹⁴ Late medieval Swedish laws refer to the fence-riding witch. In the Old Laws of Västergötland, a wild-haired woman is said to ride the gate “in a witch’s shape, ‘caught’ between night and day.”¹⁹⁵ These lines appear in the form of an accusation before an all-male Swedish court: “Woman, I saw you riding on a fence with loose hair and belt, in the troll skin, at the time when day and night are equal.”¹⁹⁶

The second component of the compound word *hægtesse* (*-disse, tesse, zussa*) is also significant. Its spirit-meaning is shared across a wide range of Indo-European languages. The Proto-Indo-European root is **dhewes-* “to fly about, smoke, be scattered, vanish.” It gave rise to “Norwegian *tysja* ‘fairy; crippled woman,’ Gaulish *dusius* ‘demon,’ [and] Lithuanian *dvasia* ‘spirit.’”¹⁹⁷ It also relates to Westphalian German *dus*, Cornish *dus* or *diz*, and Breton *duz* (all christianized to mean “devil”) and Old English *dust*.¹⁹⁸

Romans equated the Gaulish god *Dusios* to Pan; this deity also took plural form as *dusioi* or, in Latin, *dusii*. In late antiquity, Augustine and Isidore both referred to *dusii* as “incubi,” spirits who had sex with women.¹⁹⁹ But as late as the 8th century, *dusii* was still being used in France for spirits of the dead, *dusii manes*.²⁰⁰ Its deepest meaning is “spirit, ghost.”

The 10th century Anglo-Saxon cleric Aelfric used *hægtesse* in the sense of “woman of prophetic and oracular powers.”²⁰¹ He connected the *hægtesse* with *pythonissa*, a Latin term for entranced seeress,²⁰² and linked both terms with another witch-word: *Helle-rúne vel hægtesse pythonissa*.²⁰³ Both the *hægtesse* and *hellerune* were associated with female ancestors. (Chapter 5 looks at *hellerune* in more depth.)

The modern Anglo-Saxon dictionary of Bosworth-Toller defines *hægtesse* as “hag, witch, fury,” while another source gives “witch, pythoness.”²⁰⁴ These names overlap and are compared in several sources: “In late glosses, *hellerune* is given as an alternative to *hægtesse*, and *hægtesse* glosses words for the furies.”²⁰⁵ One Anglo-Saxon source gives “Hægtesse Tisiphona,” naming one of the Greek Erinnyes (Furies).²⁰⁶ Another brings in a singular “Erinys,” and compares the *hægtesse* with Anglo-Saxon forms of the valkyrie, the *wælcyrge/wælcyrre*.²⁰⁷ The Furies were a wrathful form of maternal ancestors, which is worth recalling in light of Anglo-Saxon spells that interpreted disease as attacks by *haegtessen*.

The Old English charm *Wid færstice* attempted to expel *hægtessen gescot* (“hag-shot”) along with *ésa gescot* [aesir-shot] and *ylfa gescot* (elf-shot).²⁰⁸ The charm shows a fear of *hægtessen geworc*, which apparently means the “work” of a hag spirit, not a living witch.²⁰⁹ Earlier in the charm, the *hægtessen* spirits are described as the “mighty women” who rode over the land and “sent screaming spears” (see chapter six).²¹⁰ *Hægtesse* also appears as *hæte*, a word that Aelfric used for Jezebel in translating the Vulgate’s *maledictam illam*, “that accursed woman”²¹¹ whose “sorceries” were “many.”

Old English placenames meaning “witch’s valley” gave modern Hascombe in Surrey and Hescombe in Somerset, “where the first element of the name is O.E. *hæte* or *hægtesse*, ‘witch.’”²¹² Similar phonological contractions occurred in Old High German *hesse* and *hezze*.²¹³ *Hægtesse* also relates to *hag*, symbolically if not etymologically. In folk tradition, “hag” designated a supernatural old woman at least as often a human witch or old woman.

Mary Daly drew attention to the evolution of *hag*, pointing to its archaic meaning given in *Webster’s Dictionary* as “female demon: fury, harpy,” and as *nightmare* (in the sense of a female spirit), but only later as “ugly old woman.” She pulled up archaic meanings for the word *haggard*, which originally signified “untamed” (as of a hawk), “intractable,” “willful,” “wanton,” and “unchaste.” It also referred to a “wild-eyed” person. Daly’s final touch was a discovery loaded with sexual politics: “As a noun, haggard has an ‘obsolete’ meaning: ‘an intractable person, especially: a woman reluctant to yield to wooing.’”²¹⁴ She is untamable, indominable.

English is full of magical hag-words, such as the snake called *hagworm*, and the *hagstone*, “a naturally perforated stone used as an amulet against witchcraft.”²¹⁵ These stones, also called holey stones or adder stones, were used in healing, especially for eye diseases. Another strand of meaning is found in Old Dutch *haghdisse*, with its variants *eghdisse*, *egdisse*, *haagdisse*, all meaning “lizard” (*hagedis* in modern Dutch). German *eidechse* has the same meaning,²¹⁶ as did the Old Saxon *egithassa*.²¹⁷

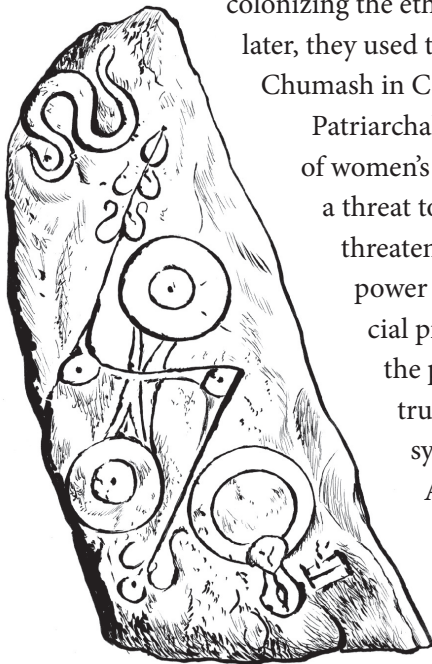
In late medieval German, *hagazussa* was compressed into *hexse*, *hecse* and finally *hexe*. In Swiss it became *hagsh*, *haagsch*, or *hezze*.²¹⁸ In Dutch it was *heks*. From German the word spread, with slightly different spellings, into the Scandinavian languages during the witch-hunt era, as continental demonologies migrated north. It was under the name of *Hexe* that multitudes of women would be burned.

Over many centuries, the priesthood gained a monopoly over the power of naming. Churchmen labored to remold folk culture to conform with their own worldview. They defined incantation, ecstatic dance, folk beliefs and ceremonies as devilish, and recast the old ethnic titles through a hostile lens.

The Anglo-Saxon *wycce*, French *sorcière*, Spanish *bruja*, Russian *vyed'ma* and Italian *strega* were diviners and healers who were, as the clergy often complained, respected among the people. Since the institutional priesthood felt rivalry with these old peasant women, it called their power dangerous. Later, they would define it as heretical, but in 700-1100 they still understood witchcraft as pagan, heathen, *bruixa*.

The witches were female in a male-dominated society, and animist peasants ruled by aristocrats who were enforcing Christianity as the state religion. Their position has similarities to that of Amazigh *kahinas* after the Islamic conquest of North Africa, to the legendary Nishan Shaman who faced repression from Confucian rulers in Manchuria, or the Maya and Diasporic Africans who were forced to catholicize their culture so that it could survive.

In the Spanish repression of Indigenous Peruvian culture, Irene Silverblatt observes, "Idolatry, curing, and witchcraft were blurred."²¹⁹ The priesthood invented penitential manuals to repress European paganism, internally colonizing the ethnic cultures there. A thousand years later, they used them to enforce Christianity on the Chumash in California.²²⁰



Patriarchal and imperial religions disapprove of women's shamanic powers and consider them a threat to the order of dominion. Men felt threatened by witches whose direct personal power could potentially overthrow their social privilege. Conquerors felt threatened by the peoples they colonized. The same was true for any people who resist hegemonic systems of sex, ethnicity, class, or gender. As the European witch hunts gained

Pictish Stone with snake, mirror and comb. Aberlemno, Scotland

momentum, all these groups ran a high risk of persecution for witchcraft.

The names for witches in the old ethnic cultures show that they were viewed as seers, prophetesses and diviners; as wisewomen, healers and herbalists; as chanters and invokers; as shapeshifters and women who journey in the spirit. The meanings of the English word “witch” were considered in chapter 2, and chapter 5 will go deeper into the *leóðrune* and women’s ancestor ceremonies. The following pages offer a wider tabulation of witch-names, if not an exhaustive one. Then we delve into the rich cultural testimony about the Norse *völur* and their ceremonies.

