The History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics, and Pagans
Jeffrey B. Russell and Brooks Alexander
Thames & Hudson, New York, NY, 2008. 216 pp., 105 illus., index. $21.95 paper.

Witchcraft is perhaps not at the top of the list of subjects historical archaeologists need to brush up on, but as with all other religious phenomena, material culture associated with the practice of witchcraft or sorcery may be encountered and require interpretation. The second edition of this overview of historical themes in witchcraft adds to the original 1980 volume a second author, a revised introduction, and two new chapters on contemporary witchcraft. Essentially an intellectual history, it does not examine material culture in detail, but does provide a framework and background that may have utility for researchers.

The introduction gives the reader a useful overview of topics covered (and not covered) as well as an important lesson in terminology. The authors provide etymological background on the many terms thrown around in these circles—witch, sorcerer, magician, pagan, wicca—and place them in the perspectives of the disciplines that use them. Anthropologists, historians, and practitioners prefer different definitions and look at witchcraft from unique angles, and a review of these distinctions is important to understanding the remainder of the book.

Russell and Alexander begin by discussing sorcery, initially as a worldwide phenomenon, its context in ancient history, then as an element of later European witchcraft which absorbs the next several chapters. By sorcery, the authors mean the attempt to manipulate the hidden connections among natural phenomena, and include various kinds of magic within that sphere. Official religion or private act, mechanical or spirit-based in conception, high (alchemy, astrology) or low (midwifery, spells), the complexity of sorcery and paganism was simplified, distilled, and categorized over time through Hebrew, Greek, Roman, and then Christian lenses. The blurring of sorcery with demonology, and association with things un-Christian led to the medieval and Renaissance concept of the evil witch. It is unfortunate that the authors drop the discussion of everyday sorcery/magic, as for much of medieval and modern history one is far more likely to encounter evidences of these phenomena than of witchcraft as they define it.

In the chapter on the origins of European witchcraft (leaving the rest of the world behind at this point) the authors examine the interaction of various belief systems to codify witchcraft as an activity of evil. There are many strands of thought, ranging from the growth of dualism in Western monotheism (i.e., Satan in opposition to God), cultural traditions of the festivals of Dionysos and Bacchus leading to the witches’ sabbat (early anti-Jewish attitudes emerging), and the long process of replacement of northern European paganism with Christianity. Here also, the authors discuss various schools of historical thought, including ecclesiastical invention, folkloric/pagan survival, and Christian heresy. Clearly, they see the stereotype of the witch—attending the orgiastic sabbat, riding a broom, killing and eating children, desecrating the cross, making a pact with Satan—as a composite of concepts from these historical strains of thought that did not crystallize until the 14th century.

One particularly enlightening thread of discussion is the continuing conflation of sorcery with demonology (only evil spirits could be commanded), and thus its inevitable link with heresy, a religious rather than civil crime. Attacks on heretical sects such as the Cathars and Waldenses on the continent set the stage for a series of church inquisitions resulting in the torture, confession, and burning of many thousands of the accused from 1450 to 1700. Curiously, in Britain (and the colonies) witchcraft was not so connected to heresy, and thus was treated as a civil crime with capital punishment in the form of hanging. Separate chapters on the witch craze on the continent and in Britain examine these trends, both intellectual and legal, in detail. The year 1450 is a key date in the spread of witch prosecutions, when the number of trials dra...
cally increased just as legal/religious treatises on witchcraft such as *Malleus Malificarum* (1486) were rolling off the earliest printing presses. The spread of knowledge coincided with the spread of fear in significant ways.

After working through the conceptual and legal basis for witchcraft prosecutions, Russell and Alexander discuss the nature of witchcraft and society during this period. Suggesting that searching for the social mechanisms involved in accusations limits a broader understanding of the phenomenon, they elaborate on issues related to gender, the Reformation and its effects, and the psychological and cultural climate that fueled the witch craze. The decline of witch hunts is placed squarely in the realm of changing cultural and religious attitudes brought about by the skeptical philosophy, where *maleficium* lost its credibility, and witchcraft and possession were begun to be seen as individual aberrant behavior rather than a supernatural conspiracy.

Late chapters detail the intellectual origins of the modern witchcraft movement, beginning with the Romantic revival of pagan ideas melded with occult interests, secret societies, and suspect scholarship. The authors characterize modern witchcraft as a combination of survivals and revivals, with many neopagan concepts largely inventions of the 20th century. This thesis is laid out in some detail, ending with an up-to-date chapter on contemporary trends, including feminism, 1960s counterculture, and the use of the Internet to create the modern Wiccan community. These last sections are enjoyable, but somewhat breathless in pace, and less relevant to historical archaeologists.

Of particular interest are the many images presented in the book, ranging from fanciful historic drawings of witches cavorting with the Devil, to presumably more-accurate renderings of gallows, burning grounds, and torture chambers. The witch house in Bamberg, Germany in the early 1600s (no longer standing) is displayed in elevation and plan view (p. 87), both fascinating in its detail and horrific in its implications. Contemporary photos display modern paraphernalia of neopagan ritual, along with a couple of temporary ritual sites in use. The illustration of a Bellarmine jug containing human hair, nail clippings, and a pin-stuck cloth heart from excavations at Westminster (p. 19), begs further discussion, but as with many of the other objects displayed in this volume, they are illustrative rather than subjects of analysis. The authors do better with paintings and drawings in terms of incorporating them into their discussions.

In summary, this is a good, concise overview of the history of witchcraft, focusing in turn on Europe, Britain, and most recently, America. As intellectual history it provides excellent background information and a good bibliography for further research on the topic. For the historical archaeologist it falls short, largely in using material culture as a source of interesting illustrations rather than as an integral part of its presentation. For a more directly relevant study, the reader should consult Ralph Merrifield’s *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* (1988, New Amsterdam Books, New York, NY).

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