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Comments and Communications

The Contemporary Evidence for Early Medieval Witchcraft-Beliefs

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I am excited about the emergence of RMN Newsletter. It is a small publication, but it stands for some big things. Our work demands long and slow gestation, rigorous research, fact-checking and referencing – not to mention subsequent editorial work. But we can also benefit from a more dynamic scholarly community, in which we can communicate and test ideas quicker – a community based more on discussing rough ideas and less on polishing gems. I am not abashed at drawing a comparison between the Newsletter and *Nature*: the journalistic dimension which John Maddox brought to *Nature* in the 1960s has long benefited the hard sciences. It is axiomatic for the Retrospective Methods Network, of course, that cultures change slowly, but it is still fair to say that humanists have been slow to learn from Maddox's example. At the same time, despite knowing perfectly well that our libraries can no longer afford the books which we ourselves write, we have been sluggish in embracing the opportunity which the internet provides for free-access publication. RMN Newsletter responds to both these issues.

This article has two main aims. One is to bring to a wider audience a small group of early medieval texts pertinent to the history of witchcraft, most of which were rather haphazardly gathered in my PhD thesis (2004: esp. 171–179), in the hope that they will receive more attention. The other is to make some methodological points about the historiography of European witchcraft and magic relevant to retrospective methods.

Readers of RMN Newsletter will probably at some point have shared the excitement with which I once read Carlo Ginzburg's *I Benandanti* (1983 [1966]), more familiar in English as *The Night Battles*: forty-odd years after its publication, this remains a startling, mind-opening insight into non-elite European culture. It also established – presumably more or less unintentionally – a paradigm which much subsequent work on witchcraft has followed. Ginzburg found a fascinating culture in Friuli, in northern Italy, of select individuals (the *benandanti* ['good walkers']) leaving their bodies by night, amongst other things to convene and fight *malandanti* ['evil walkers']. This discovery cried out for historicisation – in a sense, for retrospective methods: as well as wanting to use the *benandanti* as evidence for earlier beliefs, Ginzburg rightly also felt a need to give the *benandanti* themselves a past, to avoid the twin inquisitorial pitfalls of writing this subaltern group off as a mere aberration, or of eliding it with some handy but ill-fitting intellectual category, as the inquisitors did by integrating the *benandanti*'s stories into elite preconceptions of heresy. Accordingly, Ginzburg looked for synchronic evidence of a broad distribution of similar beliefs in space, finding them in Livonian beliefs about werewolves; and diachronic evidence of similar beliefs at earlier times, finding them in the celebrated Canon *episcopi*, a perhaps 9th century text which admonishes bishops to preach against the belief that women might ride out in the night on animals with the goddess Diana. From here, however,

Ginzburg leapt into prehistory, taking a key role in starting the craze for ‘shamanism’ which has pervaded scholarship on European magic and belief ever since (cf. Ginzburg 1992 [1989]).

We can, however, find much more about early modern witchcraft beliefs in our early medieval texts than occasional statements of ecclesiastical disapproval – if we know how to look for them. For those who still want to dive back into prehistory, better understood early medieval texts would at least offer a firmer anchor-point than the 16th century. But a better understanding of early medieval evidence would also open up what we might, in the context of the Retrospective Methods Network, call prospective methods, helping us to look forward to the early modern witchcraft trials, providing the beliefs which they reveal with a historical depth and breadth which studies of the intellectual roots of heresy and demonology only begin to provide. Looking forward from a better understood early medieval period would help us to develop a reliable history of changing mentalities in Europe. The Canon episcopi is an important text, not least because it continued to be read and heeded for centuries. But we too seldom look beyond it. The four sources listed below are just a few of the many waiting to be analysed in this connection, but they will serve to make my methodological point.

1. Burchard of Worms’s *Corrector sive medicus* is, like the *Canon episcopi*, well known in studies of witchcraft. It is a penitential and the nineteenth book of Burchard’s *Decretum*, published between 1012 and 1023. It asks, amongst other things of interest to historians of witchcraft (Hansen 1901: 40):

credidisti quod quaedam mulieres credere solent, ut tu cum aliis diaboli membris item in quietae noctis silentio clausis ianuis in aëram usque ad nubes subleveris, et ibi cum aliis pugnes, et ut vulneres alias, et tu vulnera ab eis accipias?

have you believed what certain women are accustomed to believe, that you, along, moreover, with other associates of the Devil, are raised up in the silence of the peaceful night, through closed doors, right to the clouds, and that there you fight with others, and that you wound them, and that you receive wounds from them?

2. The Old English charm *Wið færstice* [‘against a stabbing pain’] is attested only in British Library, Harley 585, a manuscript of medical texts roughly contemporary with Burchard’s *Decretum*. It presents a first-person narrator in battle against *mihtigan wif* [‘powerful women’] who have ridden across the land and inflicted illness on the patient by means of *garas* [‘spears’]. The text has formulaic similarities to Eddaic verse, indicating its coherence with vernacular poetic tradition, and the infliction of illness through spears is echoed elsewhere in Anglo-Saxon texts (Hall 2007: 1–3, 110–112).

3. The *Vita Sancti Swithuni*, composed by Lantfred of Fleury in Winchester in the 970s, describes how, in 971, an inhabitant of Winchester encounters three supernatural women in the countryside, two black and terrifying and one shining white. They all attack him, and the one in white just manages to strike the fleeing man with the breeze of her sleeve, paralysing him until, a few days later, he is miraculously restored to health by St Swithun (Lapidge 2003: 274–77). This source has an obvious relevance to the study of the dream-women of *Gísla saga* and the *dísir* of *Þiðranda þáttr*, not to mention the attack by a black supernatural woman on a twelfth-century Norwegian cleric recently brought to scholars’ attention by Haki Antonsson, Crumplin and Conti (2007); but it also deserves to be compared with the texts listed above.

4. Chapters 26–27 of the *Vita I Sancti Samsonis*, from between the early 7th century and the early 9th, probably from

Brittany but set in south-west Britain, explain how Samson and one of his deacons are attacked by a screaming

theomacham hirsutam canutamque, iam
uetulam anum suis uestimentis birrhatam
trisulcatamque uenalem in manu tenentem,
ac siluas uastas ueloci cursu uolucritantem
fugientemque recta linea insequentem
(Flobert 1997: 184)

which probably means:

an unkempt grey-haired sorceress, already
an old woman, with her garments ragged
and holding in her hand a bloody three-
pronged [weapon], and in a swift course
traversing the vast woods and rushing past,
following after [the deacon] in a straight
line.

(The term *venalis*, of course, conventionally means ‘for sale’, but we presumably have here a meaning influenced by a false etymological connection with *vena* [‘vein’], hence my translation ‘bloody’.) This *Vita* is odd in many ways, but whether or not we should take this story seriously as evidence for belief, it is clear evidence for a discourse about fast-moving, armed and harmful females – and it has close analogues in later Welsh literature and more distant ones in Antique Gaul (see Hall 2004: 176 n.224).

It is possible that the writers of some of these texts knew the work of some of the others, but they are surely too dispersed in space and genre, and in the range of their own respective analogues, simply to represent textual borrowing. Nor are any of the episodes merely a stock feature of genre: we are surely seeing traditional discourses peeping here into the textual record. Thus it seems fairly clear that across northwest Europe, certainly around 1000 and perhaps several centuries earlier, there was a discourse in which women traversed the land, inflicting harm on others. Activities of this kind are attested in not only a penitential but, to judge from its context, a perfectly serious medical text; as well as a

near-contemporary and nearly first-hand account. Even this small body of evidence transforms the reliability, but also the variability and complexity, of the cultural nexus suggested by the Canon *episcopi*. I will not analyse these texts here in more detail, even though my brief comments neglect many problems and possibilities. Suffice to say that they indicate that a more critical analysis, backed up by a fuller search of our early medieval texts, would be worthwhile – and that I do not see myself as likely to undertake it!

Instead, I focus now on what the omission, particularly of text number two above (*Wið færstice*), from historiography on European witchcraft tells us about our methods, and how we could work better. Some of these texts are perhaps simply too little known: indeed, I only found out about *Lantfred’s* because I was pointed to it by Katy Cubitt, who had herself probably seen it primarily because of Lapidge’s recent edition and translation (for her own discussion of the importance of Anglo-Latin hagiography as a source for folklore, see Cubitt 2006). But this can hardly explain all the omissions: in particular, *Wið færstice* has often been translated, discussed and even anthologised. Linguistic expertise and the structuring of syllabuses will have something to do with it: members of history departments get used to dealing with Latin texts, members of language departments to dealing with vernacular ones. And *Wið færstice* specifically has long been pigeon-holed as being about ‘elf-shot’, putatively arrows fired by mischievous, invisible sprites (cf. Hall 2007: 6–7, 96–118), to the detriment of its more prominent ‘mighty women’. It seems unlikely, however, that these factors could explain the ignoring of *Wið færstice* entirely.

Rather, the key problem, I suggest, is what Stuart Clark (1997: 4) has identified as

an overriding, though largely unspoken, commitment to the realist model of knowledge. In this model, language is seen as a straightforward reflection of a reality

outside itself and utterances are judged to be true or false according to how accurately they describe objective things. This kind of neutral reference to the external world is held to be the only reliable source of meaning and, indeed, the most important property of language.

In this kind of analysis, a word can either denote something which is objectively real, or something which is not. A historian might seek evidence of fantasies about mythical, supernatural beings (who are not actually real), or of ‘real’ witches (flesh and blood women who might be identified in the objectively observable world) – but evidence for one cannot be evidence for the other. Burchard’s Latin presents the historian with the image of a flesh-and-blood woman confessing to delusions about riding out at night and harming people, and the idea of the confession itself does not strain our expectations of physical possibility. *Wið færstice* and the *Vita Swithuni*, by contrast, confront us directly with groups of women inflicting harm by supernatural means, which does stretch the imagination – and this is perhaps why historians have neglected them. However, Burchard’s proscriptions surely presuppose texts and stories similar to *Wið færstice*, in which people fight one another outside the usual physical parameters of existence, and in which women traverse the land inflicting supernatural harm. Indeed, the mighty women of *Wið færstice* need not have been envisaged simply to have come out of the blue: the possibility is raised by Burchard’s text that they were women who should have been, as Burchard puts it in an entry adjacent to the one I quoted, lying in bed with their husbands on their bosoms.

If the present article is preaching to the choir, one of the choir’s foremost singers is of course Stephen Mitchell, whose work on Nordic sources has provided one of our best and most rounded case studies of European witchcraft beliefs before the early modern witchcraft trials (2011; for a free-access study particularly pertinent to this article, see

Mitchell 1997). Even so, Mitchell (2011: 20–21) still writes that

perhaps our best and most direct indication of prevailing, popular views of witchcraft and magic in the immediate post-Conversion era is to be found [...] among the early laws of Scandinavia.

And law codes and elite intellectual texts also form the centre of gravity for Valerie Flint’s *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (1991) or, say, Catherine Rider’s fine *Magic and Impotence in the Middle Ages* (2006) – impressive though these are in their scope. Maybe our sources are such that this really is the only option, but I suggest that with different starting assumptions, we could shift the weighting elsewhere. Narratives from hagiography or vernacular medicine which do not immediately strike modern readers as being pertinent to witchcraft might actually take us closer to the cultural crucible in which witchcraft beliefs are formed. And despite Mitchell’s important work on Scandinavia, possibilities for the study of Europe more generally still await exploration.

The bifurcation of the real and the supernatural has been exacerbated by the fact that it has permeated not only scholars’ interpretations of texts, but their interpretations even of the words of which the texts are comprised. One example is the word *hægtesse*, which occurs in *Wið færstice*. Bosworth and Toller’s *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* entry sensibly translated this as “a witch, hag, fury” (1898; cf. Hall 2007: 85–87), but the derived *Thesaurus of Old English* lists *hægtesse* under “a witch, sorceress”, but not under “a fury” or “the Fates” (Roberts & Kay with Grundy 2000 I: §§16.01.04, 16.01.06.02, 05.04.01). Somewhere, a kind of cultural blindness has come between the dictionary entry and the thesaurus-maker, who has felt the need to categorise *hægtessan* as either witches or furies, but not both. (That this is not an accident is suggested by other recategorisations: Hall 2007: 9–11.) Meaney’s response to the same impulse (1989: 17–18) was to argue that *hægtesse* (along with

wælcyrige and burgrune, words which gloss a similar range of Latin lemmata) originally denoted “minor goddesses”, but that

the coming of Christianity would have affected these words [...] The burgrune and the hægtesse would have been interpreted as basically bad, and their protective characteristics forgotten. All three words would have declined in use, and the meanings partly forgotten, so that they could be applied to mortal women, at first metaphorically, then exclusively.

This reading is viable, though this decline would have been far from sudden (as the Oxford English Dictionary shows s.v. hag, hægtesse’s reflexes continued to be used of the Furies into the 17th century). But it assumes unquestioningly that if Anglo-Saxons did not use different words for the mortals and immortals of Classical tradition, it must be because of confusion or degradation in their belief-systems. We might infer more economically that hægtesse’s semantics did not make the distinction between the supernaturally powerful woman next door, whom one might bring to trial, and the supernaturally powerful woman from elsewhere, whom one might not. Research on Old Norse has been afflicted with a similar desire to distinguish mythological women from legendary ones, or supernatural ones from real ones (cf. Hall 2007: 22–23; 2004: 174–175).

I am not, of course, arguing that we should throw all our early medieval, supernaturally powerful females (or, for that matter, males) into one capacious category: fine distinctions between different accounts and the semantics of different words are essential. But scholarship at the moment is, through some too seldom challenged assumptions, missing a pool of evidence for the understanding of supernatural power and harm in early medieval Europe. This includes Latin texts, which folklore scholars tend to miss because of their (understandable) enthusiasm for

vernacular material; and it includes texts from regions which do not produce many witchcraft trials, but which can nonetheless give us rich insights into a wider understanding of the roles of traditional supernatural agents in health and harm in early medieval Europe, such as the Celtic-speaking world.

Perhaps part of the value of research uncovering this evidence would be to provide a platform from which to peer back into an earlier time; perhaps it would help us to take a rigorous stance on the proliferation of ‘shamans’ wherever in European history our texts do not shed light. But I suspect that its greatest value would be prospective: to help us look forward through the *longue durée* of European history.

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The Vanir and ragnarøk

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The dramatic event of ragnarøk belongs undoubtedly to the most attractive and best known episodes from Old Norse mythology.¹ In narrations concerning it, however, there are, I believe, still some points of which we need a better understanding.² Among such questions is the following: Who actually has to perish in ragnarøk, or – more precisely – which categories of mythic beings were imagined to be affected by ragnarøk and which were not.

In this short paper, I will analyze the question of whether the Vanir had anything to do with ragnarøk, and conclude that they had nothing to do with it, as it was an event of no importance for their world.³

It is instructive to read here a statement in *Vafþrúðnismál* 39, where Óðinn answers *Vafþrúðnir*'s question and informs us about *Njǫrðr* (cited according to Neckel & Kuhn 1962):

í aldar røk hann mun aptr koma / heim

This can only mean: ‘In ragnarøk (aldar røk [lit. ‘doom of the age’]) he [=Njǫrðr] will return home’. This statement explains why, in the battle on the field of *Vigriðr* where ragnarøk culminates, *Njǫrðr* does not appear at all. He obviously has nothing to do there

and, when the world of the Æsir must collapse, he can return home, free of his obligation to stay in *Ásgarðr* as a hostage.⁴

As everyone knows, the five most important duels constituting the battle on *Vigriðr* are fought by Óðinn (against *Fenrir*), *Týr* (against *Garmr*), *Þórr* (against *Miðgarðsormr*), *Heimdallr* (against *Loki*) and *Freyr* (against *Surtr*). These are also duels fought by the most important Æsir (N.B. – the list of combatants exhibits a hierarchy of Æsir, in fact naming the most important gods of these kin-groups) against their most dangerous enemies, which appear to be rather monsters from the world of chaos (*Fenrir*, *Garmr*, *Miðgarðsormr*) or incarnations of evil (*Loki*, *Surtr*) as Giants. The most important of all these duels appears to be that fought by *Freyr* against *Surtr*, as it is the only one in which the victor, *Surtr*, survives and is able to complete the destruction by fire. From this it may follow that it was *Freyr* who was, at that point, the most significant among the Æsir, since his defeat is decisive!

Traditionally, we tend to count *Freyr* among the Vanir as the son of *Njǫrðr*. *Snorri* was of a different opinion and was correct on this point. We have to remember here that the authors of our sources take a very legal point