

Witchcraft: A Very Short Introduction
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Throughout history, to the present day, witchcraft raises questions about the distinction between reality and fantasy, faith and proof. This *Very Short Introduction* explores witchcraft, both as a contemporary phenomenon and a historical subject. It looks at witch-beliefs and accusations around the world, from pre-history to the present.

Questions for thought and discussion

- Is there some inherent quality in human beings that either draws them to witchcraft or predisposes them to detect it in others?
- How, in broad terms, have the stereotypes, images, and cultural associations of witchcraft changed between the classical age and the present day?
- Why throughout history have witches been so strongly associated with women?
- Throughout the ages, many men have been tried and executed for witchcraft, but can a man ever be a witch in the same way as a woman?
- Why have some writers, notably the Egyptologist Margaret Murray in the 1920s, supposed that European witches belonged to some kind of fertility cult?
- Is it right that we should stand in judgement of those who once persecuted witches, or are we restricted to trying to understand our ancestors in their own times?
- What are the major historical myths about witches, especially during the ‘witch-craze’, and why are they so hard to dispel with hard fact?
- How can we explain the massive surge of witchcraft trials in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries?
- Why do you think the acquittal rate at early modern witch-trials was so high – in south-east England (where the survival of detailed records is good) somewhere around 75 per cent?
- What emotion is involved in witchcraft accusations, and is it helpful to think in terms of ‘hysteria’, for example in relation to the Salem trials of 1692?
- Is it correct to talk of a decline of witchcraft beliefs in the Western world between the eighteenth century and the present day?
- How do modern Wiccans stand in relation to witchcraft’s historical past?
- Why are witch-hunts, rather than just witch-beliefs, so common today in the developing world and what might be done to inhibit them?
- What, if anything, do the broomstick-flying witches of the children’s storybook have in common with their historical antecedents?
- Why does the fascination with witches endure in popular culture, in everything from novels and films to cartoons and games?

Other works by Malcolm Gaskill:

Crime and Mentalities in Early Modern England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Hellish Nell: Last of Britain's Witches (London: 4th Estate, 2001).

The Matthew Hopkins Trials, volume 3 in James Sharpe and Richard M. Golden (eds), *Writings on English Witchcraft 1560–1736*, 6 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003).

Witchfinders: a Seventeenth-Century English Tragedy (London: John Murray, 2005).

Out of this World: English Adventures in America, 1607-1692 (forthcoming).

Further reading:

Jeffrey B. Russell and Brooks Alexander, *A New History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics and Pagans* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007)

John Demos, *The Enemy Within: a Short History of Witch-Hunting* (London: Penguin, 2010)

Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 3rd edn (Harlow: Pearson, 2006)

Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours: the Social and Cultural Context of Witchcraft*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002)

Lyndal Roper, *Witch Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004)

Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: a History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999)