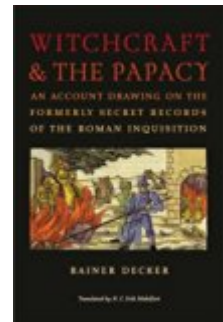


**Rainer Decker.** *Witchcraft and the Papacy: An Account Drawing on the Formerly Secret Records of the Roman Inquisition.* Translated by H. C. Erik Midelfort. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008. xv + 262 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-2747-3.



**Reviewed by** William Bradford Smith

**Published on** H-German (March, 2011)

**Commissioned by** Susan R. Boettcher

The relationship of the papacy to witch-hunting has been a subject of controversy for some time. With this book, Rainer Decker expands the debate by addressing the impact of newly available historical sources. For scholars such as Wilhelm Gottlieb Soldan and Heinrich Heppe, the matter was fairly straightforward: any denial of Catholic dogma was a denial of the authority of the papacy.[1] Consequently, beliefs of heretics, and by extension witches, constituted a direct assault on the power of the popes. Later historians, such as Joseph Hansen and Henry Charles Lea, sought to document more fully the precise relationship between the papacy and persecution.[2] But all of these efforts were limited by the inability of scholars to look at what seemed the most relevant sources--the popes' own statements on the subject of witchcraft. The archives of the Holy Office, the most likely repository of such source material, however, remained closed to scholars. Indeed, until 1880, the forbidding inscription "Anyone entering here will be automatically excommunicated" stood over the entrance to the Secret

Vatican archive. Finally, Pope Leo XIII granted scholars limited access to this closely guarded treasure trove. In 1996, then-provost of the Congregation of the Faith Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger invited a small group of researchers to view the archives of the Holy Office. Two years later, the archives opened to the public; currently all material before 1939 is available. These sources have spurred efforts by scholars of history and theology to reconsider the history of the Inquisition and the papacy. Rainer Decker's book is both an original work of scholarship and a window into the historical literature that has appeared in the decade since the opening of the archive.

No Hollywood-style Dan Brown revelations are found here. The Vatican archives suffered mightily during the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars. Little remains of the court records or correspondence from the period before 1800. Decker's endnotes make clear just how few documents remain. For the period before 1500, moreover, nearly all the relevant materials have long since been published. The earlier chap-

ters of the book are thus essentially synthetic, and Decker covers little new ground. Indeed, readers familiar with the work of Norman Cohn and Richard Kieckhefer will find most of the material here very familiar.[3] Still, Decker has provided one of the most thorough short surveys of the attitude of the medieval church on magic. More importantly, sources for the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries cast new light on some older problems and provide, if not iron-clad solutions, at least greater clarity than was possible before.

Throughout the book, Decker asks about the official position the popes took on witchcraft. For most of the period under analysis, there was none. Decker begins by examining a well-known letter sent by Gregory VII to King Harald Blue-tooth of Norway on the treatment of witches. Decker finds a set of attitudes that challenge stereotypical ideas about the medieval papacy: "In contrast to our modern expectations we find the pope, a representative of the supposedly misogynistic clergy ... protecting women against a lapse into pre-Christian discrimination against women" (p. 2). The drive towards persecution in the early and high Middle Ages did not, in fact, come from the clergy, who did not share in the "collective delusion" of witchcraft, a pagan legacy still common among the peasantry (p. 3). From the Carolingian period onward, civil and canon law tended to dismiss "night flight" and other popular ideas—here the oft-cited early medieval "Canon *episcopi*" stands at the center of the discussion. Yet, as Decker notes, these early decrees were products of local royal or episcopal authorities. Popes did not involve themselves at all in the punishment of witches. The establishment of the Inquisition in the thirteenth century did little to change this practice. According to Decker, the papal inquisition had "hardly anything at all" to do with the persecution of witches (p. 13). It was not until the fourteenth century that the first papal decrees against sorcery appeared. These decrees came about, however, not because of a paranoid fear of demons and witches, but rather because of

a notorious attempt to assassinate John XXII through sorcery. The popes responded to concrete, personal threats. These attacks, moreover, came from clerics. Learned, not popular, magic was the concern of the popes.

Decker notes the absence of the major tenets of later witchcraft beliefs, in particular night flight and intercourse with the devil, in papal decrees and fourteenth-century treatises. In the first case, the language of *episcopi* remained current. In the *Directorium Inquisitorum* (1376), for instance, Nicholas Eymeric concentrated on the pact with the devil and the various rituals of demon worship that characterized uncovered plots. The papacy defined sorcery as heretical because it involved worship of false gods and misappropriation of the sacraments. Eymeric, like John XXII, responded not to rumor, but to documented practices of learned necromancy. The idea of the witches' sabbath, in contrast, arose not from the Inquisition, but from observations of local authorities in Swiss trials of the early fifteenth century. The image of witchcraft that emerged in these trials reflected the beliefs and superstitions of the recorders.

This point, Decker claims, is particularly true for the author of *Malleus maleficarum* (1486). Heinrich Kramer, observes Decker, was frustrated at his failure to gain support from either the bishops or the popes for his schemes. In Decker's opinion, Kramer became a loose cannon, as well as something of a charlatan. His *magnum opus* was a dogmatic representation of witchcraft ideas from fifty years earlier to which he added "his own characteristic spin" (p. 57). Kramer duped the faculty at Cologne into providing the book's imprimatur. The popes, meanwhile, concerned themselves with real heretics—the Hussites in particular—and conciliarists, rather than with chasing phantoms. Local secular authorities undertook the witch hunts of sixteenth-century Germany. The popes and the Inquisition, in contrast, re-

mained uninvolved in the radicalization of witch-hunting.

The case of Italy and mass trials there provide important context for this statement. Decker devotes a chapter to the largest wave of persecution, which befell the Venetian territories between 1485 and 1521. The city of Venice opposed the trials, which local bishops usually initiated under the influence of Kramer. The papacy intervened on behalf of the bishops at first, but not out of any particular interest in witchcraft. Instead, it acted in order to preserve the authority of the bishops and the papal nuncio. In the end, the popes supported the city's view, ending the trials. Thereafter, learned opinion in Rome as elsewhere turned against the trials. Andreas Alciati, for instance, appears as the representative of the papal viewpoint—legal skepticism—against the radicalism of *Malleus*. The popes left witchcraft prosecution in the Papal States to secular authorities. But, according to Decker, their disengagement from the debate "meant in practice that they gave zealous inquisitors free rein" (p. 80). A change in direction came with the formation of the Roman Inquisition in 1542. The popes, having grown distrustful of regional authorities, now took much more direct interest in the prosecution of heresy. Paul IV (1555-59) became the first pope to deal with witchcraft personally. His record is not edifying—he greatly expanded the number of crimes punishable by death and widened the definitions of witchcraft and heresy. His successors acted far more cautiously, demanding higher standards of proof in capital cases. By the end of the century, popes regularly intervened in trials on behalf of the accused. In 1582, for instance, a judge received a sentence to the galleys for conducting trials in the manner common in Germany.

Decker shows that two distinctive discourses on witchcraft developed north and south of the Alps. The official approach of the popes and the Roman Inquisition was codified in *Instructions Concerning Witchcraft Trials*, composed around

1628 by Giulio Monterenzi. The approach presented in this work followed Alciati closely, and forbade many of the judicial excesses found in the German trials; in particular, indiscriminate use of torture. The appearance of *Instructions* coincided with a marked decrease in persecution in Italy. In Rome, only ten executions for witchcraft occurred between 1550 and 1800, the last in 1641. Necromancy, a crime peculiar to male clerics, remained the prime concern, especially after a notorious case in 1630 involving the monks at Santa Pressede. Decker devotes two chapters to examples of the popes' attempts to end or at least mediate trials in Switzerland and Germany in the years after 1630. In these cases, as in the earlier ones, the primary culprits were zealous, local, secular authorities. In Paderborn, the bishops were forced to surrender to "urgings from the grass roots" (p. 172). Decker stresses that "in the long run, the Roman approach emphasizing pastoral care instead of exorcisms and executions solved the problems" (p. 173). In the short run, however, "witch trials and lynchings" had occurred in Paderborn, due largely to the weakness of the bishop and the inability or unwillingness of secular elites to resist the cries of the mob (p. 173).

The last three chapters of the book examine the last witch trials from the late seventeenth through mid-nineteenth centuries. As one would expect, only a handful of trials occurred in Rome itself, mostly dealing with necromancy or desecration of the sacrament. Heresy, not witchcraft, remained the primary concern, and such trials were conducted according to the standards in *Instructions*. In Switzerland, two trials were held in the late eighteenth century. Decker's examination of these instances demonstrates again the agency of local, secular authorities: "It was not the popes and ecclesiastical inquisitor of the early modern period who displayed a fanatic zeal for persecutions, but large portions of the simple people, the lower clergy, and the secular judges" (p. 197). Moreover, it was not the representatives of the secular, anti-clerical Enlightenment, but the Ro-

man church, that stood against persecution. Catholic communities there tended not to search for witches, in contrast to Catholics in Switzerland. Decker refers to this difference as the spread of a Mediterranean, Catholic culture. In this environment, "the Church dealt with superstition, demonic possession, and witchcraft not by denying their reality in theory, but by setting very high standards of proof for legal conviction, and ... repentance and improvement of life were held to be more important than punishment" (p. 201).

Pastoral concern, in other words, rather than rational skepticism, guided the church in the moderation and ultimate abandonment of persecution. Nonetheless, the church never fully abandoned its acknowledgement of witchcraft. Decker summarizes Catholic theologian Paul Haffner's argument of 1880, which defined Catholic theology in opposition to ideologies of the modern Enlightenment: The church believed in the potential influence of demons on humans. But this belief in demons did not lead to a call for persecution of suspected demons or witches. Indeed, German practices "struck Italian clerics of the seventeenth century as incomprehensible and revolting" (p. 208). Herein lies a key distinction between the viewpoints that developed north and south of the Alps after 1700. The violence and inhumanity of the northern trials so disturbed communities in Rome that they ultimately denied the possibility of magic in their rejection of the trials themselves. In the south, no comparable trials were held that provoked a visceral response strong enough to reject the concept of magic.

Decker concludes with the argument that "resentment-filled" studies produced by a number of modern historians have unduly influenced the historiography: "[O]ne should not speak sweepingly of the witch hunts as a policy of 'the' Catholic Church" (p. 215). At the same time, he cautions against ignoring the excesses and horrors permitted within the supposed sphere of influence of the church. Decker finds the church

culpable for allowing the trials--but more owing to a possibly willful ignorance than active support. At the height of persecutions in Germany, Sixtus V and his advisors appear to have known little about events in the north. On the few occasions that popes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries openly supported persecution, argues Decker, they did so without understanding the magnitude of the trials. When popes directly engaged in cases of which they had accurate knowledge, they overwhelmingly supported the accused. Based on Decker's analysis, then, attempts to blame a monolithic Catholic Church or the institution of the papacy for making material contributions to creating a society of persecution are unfounded, resting more on historians' anti-clerical prejudice than evidence.

Overall, this is a fascinating study. Its great strength lies in its range. In just over 250 pages, Decker provides sufficient analysis of representative case studies across a millennium. The chronological scope is impressive--few works tie together the medieval and early modern witch hunts as successfully. Similarly, few general works address the Italian cases. Decker has compellingly synthesized the most recent scholarship on Italian and Swiss trials into the larger narrative of the witchcraft persecutions. The materials from the Vatican archives, moreover, allow readers to consider the larger question of culpability in the roles of secular and spiritual authorities in trials.

Nonetheless, Decker promotes a negative thesis that is at times problematic. Focusing on what did not happen makes it difficult to see what did. He argues against scholars who place the bulk of blame for the extent of witch trials on the church and the papacy by providing evidence of what the popes did not think or do. This approach raises a number of issues about the actual reach of the church beyond southern Europe. At times the papacy appears impotent in the face of secular authorities; at other points it is able to intervene effectively. Interestingly, in the former case,

this action nearly always coincides with persecution of the accused; in the latter case, papal intervention generally appears in a positive light. Such an interpretation, if true, raises the question of whether the papacy had any real authority at all outside of Italy and a few places in Switzerland. The cases cited would lead one to think not, in which case the popes' views on witchcraft seem less relevant to the role of the church in witch trials. Nevertheless, Decker has provided excellent answers to questions about the witch trials that, in the past, have been evaluated more on the basis of assumptions than evidence. This book ought to be read by scholars not only of witchcraft, but anyone interested in early modern Catholicism.

Finally, some words of praise are in order for the translation. H. C. Erik Midelfort once again demonstrates his deep appreciation of German and his ability to transform academic German into idiomatic English. This is a book deserving of being brought before a larger audience; the skill of the translator ensures that Decker's meaning is presented to us in a manner that is both accurate and stylish. This book deserves a large audience; the skill of the translator has ensured that it will be an international one.

#### Notes

[1]. Wilhelm Gottlieb Soldan and Heinrich Heppe, *Geschichte der Hexenprocesse* (Lübeck & Leipzig: Antäus Verlag, 1938).

[2]. Joseph Hansen, *Zauberwahn, Inquisition und Hexenprozess im Mittelalter und die Entstehung der großen Hexenverfolgung* (Munich and Leipzig: R. Oldenbourg, 1900); and Henry Charles Lea, *History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1888).

[3]. Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); and Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** William Bradford Smith. Review of Decker, Rainer. *Witchcraft and the Papacy: An Account Drawing on the Formerly Secret Records of the Roman Inquisition*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. March, 2011.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25918>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.