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WITCHCRAFT AND WITCH HUNTING
IN LATE MEDIEVAL AND EARLY
MODERN ITALY

Matteo Duni

My chapter will examine witch beliefs and witch hunting from the late fourteenth to the early eighteenth centuries in the territories that are at present part of Italy, but which belonged to many different states before these were unified when the Kingdom of Italy was formed (1861). It will also include some Italian-speaking areas which now belong to Switzerland. Such political fragmentation had important consequences on the prosecution of witchcraft, which was carried out in very different institutional and legal frameworks, as well as on the geographical distribution of the trials, which was extremely uneven, and finally on the relevant archival documentation, which was dispersed and often lost.

Witch beliefs displayed a remarkable variety, in all likelihood stemming from profound original differences in social and cultural contexts. Since the overwhelming majority of the population spoke only in the many native dialects used in the different areas of the Peninsula, the very terminology used to denote a witch was far from uniform. The term could vary from the Northern and Central Italian strega to the Southern Italian magara and masciara, but included also iana and ianara (both probably deriving from the name of the pagan goddess Diana), and more local variants still. The term strega also existed in the male version (stregone), and both could interchangeably refer to either agents of the specific set of deeds attributed to night-flying witches (pact with the devil, participation in the Sabbat, and so on), or to the practitioners of generic maleficent, as well as benevolent, magic. Agents of the first type were persecuted harshly, but only in some parts of Italy and for a relatively short time—at least as far as church courts, such as the Inquisition, were concerned. Those of the second type, by contrast, were the object of a sustained attention from tribunals throughout the entire period but were dealt with in fairly lenient terms, especially by the Inquisition. Studying the history of witchcraft and witch hunts in Italy therefore requires the adoption of multiple analytical models, capable of taking into account the extreme diversity of the political and legal backgrounds, as well as of describing and interpreting the folkloric varieties of the witchcraft paradigm. In this chapter, I will first assess the dimensions of the witch hunt both in terms of its geography and of the number of people tried and executed. I will use the term witch hunt to refer specifically to the persecutions of men and women accused of being members of the sect of the witches and of having made a pact with the devil. At the same time, I will also look
at the prosecution of all types of magic and of “superstitions”, meaning the wide area of practices based on a mixture of folkloric beliefs, magical techniques, and church rituals. Due attention will be devoted to the repressive apparatus and its changing goals and structures. Then I will explore the types of magical operations, the gender of the agents who performed them, and the different versions of the “mythology of witchcraft” found in various parts of Italy. In the conclusion, I will attempt an overall interpretation of the phenomenon.

The dimensions of the witch hunt: times, places, numbers

We can safely assume four things to be true with regard to the Italian witch hunt: it began early, took place almost exclusively north of the present-day region of Tuscany, only rarely reached the mass dimensions it had in northern Europe, and was mostly the work of church courts. This last point requires some explanation. The Inquisition shared with secular justice the responsibility of trying heretics, as magicians and witches were considered to be, because heresy was a crime which both church and state courts could prosecute (a crime of “mixed jurisdiction”, as jurists called it), and also because criminal law mandated that harm provoked by witchcraft be punished by the civil magistrate. In practice, however, secular and ecclesiastical judges hunted witches with variable levels of commitment: while inquisitors were responsible for the great majority of trials overall, and were more active in the first phase of the witch hunt (c. 1420s–1520s), secular judges – appointed by the rulers or governments of the different Italian states – took the lead from the early seventeenth century, especially in terms of the number of death sentences. Inquisitors were appointed by the authorities of the Catholic organizations they came from, namely the Dominican and the Franciscan orders, up until 1542. From that year, following the reorganization of the Catholic Church’s repressive apparatus, they were appointed by the Holy Office of the Inquisition, as the central institution for the prosecution of heresy in the Italian Peninsula was called. This did not apply to Sicily and Sardinia, however, as the two islands came under the authority of the Spanish Inquisition from the early 1490s.

As far as chronology goes, scholars unanimously consider the trials and eventual execution (in 1385 and 1390) of two Milanese women, Sibilia Zanni and Pierina de’ Bugatis, as the earliest cases of capital punishment meted out to persons who had confessed to a series of activities closely resembling those eventually subsumed under the “cumulative concept” of witchcraft. At the other extreme, the executions of two men, a nobleman who had tried to kill his wife casting a malevolent spell and his accomplice, decreed in Turin by a secular court in 1723, were probably the last capital sentences for magical practices.

While the burnings of Sibilia and Pierina were isolated cases at the close of the fourteenth century, from the third decade of the fifteenth century several trials ending with the death penalty testify to the growing concern of authorities for the diffusion of the new heresy. Three clusters of trials, ranging from 1419–20 to 1434–37, ended with the execution of six people, all in the northern region of Valle d’Aosta and at the hand of inquisitors. In Rome, as well as in Perugia and Todi (both towns in Umbria, a central region), a few women were executed between the 1420s and the 1440s in trials which show how effective the anti-witchcraft sermons delivered by the famous Franciscan preacher Bernardino of Siena were in inducing secular judges to
mete out harsh sentences. The first large-scale hunt seems to have taken place in the Valle d’Aosta during 1445–49, with nine people tried and seven burned at the stake by papal inquisitors, but the pace of the prosecutions remained otherwise slow in the first half of the century, with a total of twenty-four witches executed. The tempo quickened noticeably in the second half, reaching a first peak in the 1480s – with about forty people put to death in that decade – and showing a marked concentration in the Alpine areas which was to remain a constant feature throughout the Italian witch hunts.6

The extremely uneven state of sources makes any estimate very tentative at best, but in all likelihood the first three decades of the sixteenth century were the bloodiest of the entire witch hunting era, claiming the lives of no fewer than two hundred women and men. In the 1510s, the Alpine valleys between Lombardy and Trentino were the epicenter of particularly harsh hunts, such as those in the territory of Como (between thirty and sixty executions in 1513–14, but some accounts relate as many as three hundred) and those in the Valcamonica (between sixty-two and eighty in 1518–19) – all at the hands of inquisitors. The latter were likewise responsible for brutal campaigns in the 1520s, beginning in Lombardy, in the rural district of Varese (Venegono Superiore, seven executions in 1520) and in the mountainous Valtellina (forty trials and seven executions, 1523).7 This wave of persecution extended south of the Po River, to Mirandola in the region of Emilia, where the southernmost mass witch hunt in the Peninsula took place in 1522–23 (sixty trials and ten executions).8

Scholars have speculated that witch hunting may have reached such high levels in this period due to the impact of the Italian wars, the almost uninterrupted series of conflicts from 1494 to 1530. While the disrupting effects of prolonged warfare possibly contributed to worsen the witch hunt in some cases, they do not seem to have been its major cause, since trials and executions had reached significant numbers years before the wars and, in any case, did not increase noticeably in some of the areas most affected by the fighting (from Tuscany to Lazio and Campania). The single most influential precipitating factor is more likely to have been the high level of religious zeal of Dominican inquisitors. Forming a vast and well-connected network, they mobilized to fight the witches as both judges and demonologists, exchanging information that helped them write several tracts on the topic as well as guide their endeavors in an apparently coordinated series of witch hunting campaigns closely following one another.9

The spread of ideas and movements inspired by the Protestant Reformation in the Peninsula prompted the institution of the Holy Office of the Inquisition in 1542 and the subsequent refocusing of the inquisitors’ action on Protestant “heretics”, perceived as being a much greater threat to the Catholic Church than witches.10 An evident consequence of this major shift was the sudden drop in the numbers of capital sentences for witchcraft, which go from circa twenty-five in the 1520s to thirteen in the 1530s, to eight in the 1540s, totaling no more than twelve during 1551–1570 and thirteen in the following decade.11

When the danger posed by doctrinal dissent in the Peninsula began to subside, witches were again sent to the stake in substantial numbers from the 1580s, although these prosecutions followed rather different patterns. On the one hand, starting in the last decades of the century, the Holy Office developed cautiously skeptical guidelines, detailed in a key document known as the “Instruction on trial procedure
in cases of witchcraft, enchantments and harmful spells”. These highlighted the often illusory nature of witchcraft and called for greater care and restraint in its prosecution. On the other hand, a centralized system of supervision of the local branches of the Inquisition made major panics isolated events, rather than parts of a concerted effort, and the work of distinctive figures operating in peculiar circumstances. This was certainly the case with the 1583 witch hunt in the Mesolcina, an Italian-speaking valley in the Swiss canton of Grisons (Graubünden) but under the spiritual jurisdiction of the archbishop of Milan, at the time Cardinal Carlo Borromeo, who launched a harsh campaign ending with over ninety trials and seven women burned alive despite objections from the Holy Office. He eventually delegated the authority to hunt witches to a local arch-priest, Giovan Pietro Stoppani, who went on to try hundreds of people in the valleys between the dioceses of Como and Milan, burning at the stake no fewer than sixty-three (and possibly as many as one hundred) during 1589–97, but this time apparently without opposition from Rome. The exploits of Stoppani, likely the most successful witch hunter in early modern Italy, show that by this time large-scale hunts were led mostly by judges not part of the inquisitorial network supervised by the Holy Office. A case in point is the town of Triora, an outpost of the republic of Genoa located in the Ligurian Alps, where a witch-panic fueled by the local vicar of the Inquisition led to a heavy intervention of the Genoese government and to the trial of over thirty women, five of whom were killed by brutal torture at the hands of a secular judge in 1588. From the beginning of the seventeenth century, state authorities began taking a leading role in the witch hunt. The Holy Office concentrated increasingly on trials for sorcery and “superstitions” and, from this respect, the last decades of the 1500s and the first half of the 1600s seem to have been overall the period of most intense activity. Papal decrees such as Sixtus V’s constitution *Immensa Aeterni Dei* (1588), by extending the jurisdiction of the Inquisition to include “simple” spells that did not smack of manifest heresy, spurred local branches to a much more careful control of a wider range of magical practices. The Inquisition of Modena, for example, dealt with eighty-eight magicians and sorceresses during 1581–1600, that is, more than the total number of cases (eighty) for the period 1495–1580. Surviving documents from the Inquisition of Venice for 1580–92 and 1615–30, from the Inquisition of Aquileia-Concordia (in the region of Friuli) for 1596–1610 and 1641–55, and between 1590 and 1650, show a marked increase in the number of prosecutions for sorcery, magic, and witchcraft. Despite the fact that inquisitors were trying sorcerers and magicians in unprecedented numbers, they were meting out very few death sentences, in keeping with the new policy of the Holy Office, which in practice promoted a much more lenient treatment of diabolical witches while never formally downgrading their crime to the status of a minor offense. In fact, all major witch hunts in this period seem to have been conducted by secular courts, and to have taken place mostly in the Italian-speaking areas of Swiss cantons, or in the valleys of Trentino and of Alto Adige (southern Tyrol) under the authority of prince-bishops of the Holy Roman Empire. In the Val Leventina, not far from Lugano, the secular judges of the canton of Uri tried almost three hundred people, of which ninety-three were sentenced to death, in a series of hunts stretching from 1610 to 1687. Likewise in the Val di Non (1611–15), in the Val di Fassa (1627–31), and at Nogaredo (1646–47), all part of the Trentino, local
magistrates executed ten, six, and eight witches respectively, without any intervention from inquisitors. Witch hunts also took a heavy toll in the Duchy of Piedmont, where the courts of local feudal lords in the areas of Asti (1612) and Monferrato (1631–32) were responsible for circa twenty-five deaths.

The complete withdrawal of the Inquisition from witch hunting seems to have characterized the eighteenth century. Trials for magic and superstitions did not decline very rapidly, however, as their numbers actually peaked in some areas, such as in Modena during 1690–1720, and in Siena, where the years between 1716 and 1750 actually set an all-time record. Secular courts increasingly claimed exclusive rights to prosecute black magic when state interests appeared to be at stake. Between 1709 and 1717, a few trials in Turin ended in the death sentence for one man and two women accused of the attempted murder of Duke Victor Amadeus II of Savoy by means of a voodoo-style statuette. Even in Venice, state justice was becoming more jealous of its prerogatives and would interfere with the jurisdiction of the church, as shown in a very late series of trials at Budrio (in the Friuli, 1745) in which the Venetian government overrode the Inquisition, acquitting the culprits and downgrading witchcraft accusations to a case of slandering in 1753. Thus, the centralizing tendencies of state administration, strengthened by the growing skepticism of the intellectual elites, were leading to a de facto decriminalization of witchcraft all over the Italian peninsula around the middle of the 1700s.

The final toll of the witch hunts – to be taken with caution due to the problematic state of sources – varies between a minimum of 418 executions estimated by Andrea Del Col, to an approximate maximum of 2,500 proposed by Wolfgang Behringer. Behringer’s estimate seems excessive, since it would imply that the actual number of executions was almost four times that of known executions, which I calculate between 650 and 750 – figures I regard to be closer to the truth. Conjectural counts of the total number of trials for magic and witchcraft range between 22,000 and 33,000. As far as the chronological distribution goes, we can notice that, after a low point between the 1550s and the 1570s, numbers of executions went up sharply during 1580 through 1600 (roughly fifty per decade) but fell even more markedly in the first ten years of the seventeenth century (only two). They rebounded vigorously in the 1610s with over fifty executions, and remained at high levels during the following three decades (between twenty-six and thirty-eight each, the majority from the Leventina hunts). From the 1650s onward, however, the total per decade dropped to very low figures, never again reaching double digits. It appears, therefore, that as far as the number of death sentences is concerned, from the late sixteenth century the witch hunt in Italy roughly echoed the same rhythm it had followed in the heart of Europe (Germany, France), with a very intense period between 1580 and 1630 followed by a slow decline. Interestingly, the activity of the Spanish Inquisition in Sicily also seems to have been wholly aligned with this pattern. While death penalty was an extremely unlikely outcome for a witchcraft trial (we know of only fourteen over the entire era), proceedings against magicians and witches were numerous, circa one thousand, and they peaked during 1590–1655, with over two hundred trials in some of these decades. Trials decreased rather sharply in the second half of the seventeenth century and more drastically from the beginning of the eighteenth, with the last public auto-da-fé (proclamation of the verdict) of two women condemned for witchcraft taking place in Palermo in 1744.
As far as the geography of the hunt goes, a clear-cut distinction separates Alpine territories and those in proximity of the Alps from the rest. Close to 500 executions, or about 70% of the total, took place in the mountainous areas in the northern part of the Peninsula, including Swiss and south-Tyrolian hunts, while another 145 (or circa 20%) occurred in urban centers or in rural and hilly districts located in the North. This means that only 10% of the death sentences (about seventy) were carried out south of the present-day region of Emilia Romagna, with a minimal fraction in the Kingdom of Naples and in Sicily. Witch hunting was thus a stable feature in the life of Alpine communities and occurred with relative frequency in the cities and towns of the Po River valley, but it never established solid roots in the social and religious landscape of the remaining two-thirds of the Peninsula.

Witches and witchcraft: identities and practices

Identities

The proportion of women to men among the victims of the hunt can be evaluated with a minimum of accuracy only in a handful of cases, those of tribunals whose trial series have been preserved and have been systematically studied. In Modena, of the 166 people tried or denounced for all types of magic and witchcraft over the period 1495–1600, 124, or 75% of the total, were women.24 In Venice, women represent circa 70% of the individuals tried during 1550–1650 (490 over a total of 714).25 In Siena, research covering a longer series of records shows that while for the period 1580–1650 the percentage of women was identical to that of Venice (71%), it dropped to an average of 45% over the next seventy years (1651–1721) for unknown reasons.26 Figures for the Spanish Inquisition’s activity in Sicily over an even longer time span show percentages comparable to this latter, but inverted rankings: men made up circa 47% (461 over 974), and women 53% (513) of the people condemned between 1543 and 1782.27 As far as age and marital status of the women tried are concerned, the conclusions we can draw from systematic research indicate that Italian witches were not particularly old, as actually the number of women still in their fertile years was roughly equivalent to that of post-menopausal women.28 Furthermore, widows or spinsters did not exceed married women by a wide margin, or at all – in fact, these latter could be more numerous, as in Sicily.

Such general considerations, however, are based on a very limited availability of data. Until more detailed, in-depth research is carried out on a wider set of tribunals, it is more meaningful to look for patterns suggested by the specific conditions in which magic and witchcraft were practiced. A closer analysis of these series of trials reveals that the gender distribution of witches seems to have been influenced by a combination of geographical and sociological factors, which in turn determined what witches did, or were believed to be doing.

Women made up the clear majority of those accused of having gone to the Sabbat and made a pact with the devil in the agricultural and mountainous lands of Northern Italy. For example, thirty-one women and nine men were tried in the witch hunts of the Valle d’Aosta (from 1420 to 1544), some of the earliest in Europe. Considering the broader set of known cases, it would seem that the “average” witch hunt – at least in terms of the witches’ gender – was similar to that of Sondrio and...
Valtellina (in 1523), with twenty-nine women and eleven men tried (thus 70% and 30% of the total).

Surviving records therefore provide a clear sense of the prevalence of women among witches conforming to the “cumulative concept”, but they are much less eloquent about their social status. While in some witch hunts – especially those conducted in sparsely populated areas – the women tried were of a lowly condition, it appears that whenever urban centers of some importance were involved, witches were on average lower-middle class (i.e. belonging to the artisans’ and shopkeepers’ group), and it was not rare to see members of prominent families among those accused. In 1523 at Sondrio, for example, three women out of the four burned at the stake came from middle class or upper-middle class backgrounds – as did two men out of three (they were merchants or notaries). But all the nine people burned by the inquisitor of Piedmont in the villages of Rifreddo and Gambasca (1495) were poor women, just as were the seven sent to the stake in Venegono Superiore by the inquisitor of Lombardy in 1520. In the trials carried out in the Valle d’Aosta (circa 1420–1540), the women accused were also marginal in their communities, not necessarily because they were poor, but because they were regarded as outsiders due to personal traits such as aggressive character, scandalous sexual behavior, or simply because they came from a different locality.

Leaving behind the mountains and the countryside, Italian cities saw the activities of a different type of witch. The night-flying, devil-worshipping enemy of Christianity was almost completely replaced by the less terrifying figure of the enchantress, constantly intent on countering illness through magical healing or on bewitching the body and soul of men at the behest of a mostly (but not exclusively) female clientele. However, the enchantress had to share the stage with considerable numbers of male wizards and sorcerers, who typically presided over more sophisticated kinds of practices, such as the conjuration of demons or treasure hunting. Gender divisions were not rigid, but were certainly marked and could be absolute in some cases. In Siena, for example, women represented an astonishing 99% of those accused of maleficium (harmful magic), as well as the overwhelming majority of healers. Furthermore, in urban centers such as Venice, Rome, Modena and Siena, prostitutes made up a significant proportion of those who practiced love magic, both for their own goals (to guarantee their customers’ affection) and for other women who wanted to secure a spouse or to fix marital problems. Like prostitutes and courtesans, it was also usual for enchantresses to form clusters in which older women would instruct the younger in the exercise of the forbidden arts. Support from such networks of friends and accomplices often enabled sorceresses and their male counterparts to minimize the consequences of prosecution.

Contrary to the situation in Siena, healing was regularly performed by male agents in Venice and in Modena, especially by clergy. This last point highlights an important element all cities had in common: most men practicing magic belonged to the clergy. In Venice, ninety-nine out of 224 men tried by the Inquisition (or 45%) were clerics, as were twelve out of the twenty-seven men accused in Modena in the last two decades of the sixteenth century. Trials of the Spanish Inquisition in Sicily show similar figures, as 160 out of 461 men tried (35%) were clerics.

Available studies, therefore, show that it is problematic to single out some traits as being “typical” of Italian witches. While confirming that women were generally
the majority of those accused, they indicate that both their age and their social status could vary depending on a number of factors, not differently than in the rest of Europe. Furthermore, they reveal that men were usually a sizable minority, sometimes nearing half of the total of those tried, and that more often than not they were ecclesiastics.

**Practices**

The apparently surprising, marked presence of clerics can be explained in light of the type of magic men typically performed: necromancy, or ritual magic, based on complex procedures described in books, thus requiring some degree of literacy, a characteristic more commonly found among clergy than in the general population. This was the case of common practices such as the search for hidden treasures: books of necromancy detailed the procedures necessary to dispose of the demons who were believed to guard them. However, the primary motive for the prevalence of clerics was that the majority of the faithful considered the Catholic Church as a locus of supernatural power which could be resorted to for a variety of objectives, most often at cross-purposes with official doctrine. The vast majority of magical practices included elements borrowed from church rituals. Indeed, some of the most common types of love magic were known as “orazioni”, or prayers, whose format and language they mimicked. One example is that of the “orazione di San Daniele”, a love spell resorted to by the Modenese sorceress Costanza “Barbetta”. It required that thirty-three candles be lit on an equal number of days, the same as the supposed age of Christ at the time of his Passion. The “prayer” then went on to invoke the name of the person whose love the spell was meant to spark “by the passion of Christ, by the blows, by the nails”, listing the mysteries of the Passion as if it were an orthodox litany. Since enchantresses such as Costanza tapped into Catholic liturgy, it was only natural that ecclesiastics, who performed it professionally, would have an even more powerful aura as magicians. Furthermore, due to their mostly rudimentary training and education, clergy often failed to distinguish between the licit and the illicit in their manipulation of the sacred, and routinely took part in magico-religious operations.

It would be impossible (and pointless) to analyze the innumerable variations of such practices found in most surviving trial series. What is worth stressing here is that they shed light on the climate of regular interaction between different agents, which characterized the practice of magic in Italian cities. Regardless of their social background and specialization, enchantresses and wizards exchanged magical lore and even collaborated to produce certain spells. Thus, boundaries between high magic, codified in books, and low magic, mostly transmitted orally, could be permeable.

The Modenese Bernardina Stadera, a procuress tried for sorcery in 1499, would use in her spells mysterious signs she had copied from books of necromancy after borrowing them from some Servite friars. She also kept a demonic spirit in a glass sphere, another item typically found in the arsenal of more sophisticated magicians, in order to obtain predictions on future events. Communication between different practitioners, and cross-fertilization between their respective cultural worlds, are perhaps nowhere more evident than in the area of healing magic. Widely resorted to especially by lower-class patients, for whom official physicians were both culturally distant and expensive, healers could draw on
a variety of sources. Their cures typically consisted of remedies based on the natural properties of plants, animal parts, and minerals, accompanied by rituals supposed to enhance the effectiveness of the process. Magical and religious elements were mixed so intimately that one of the most common forms of healing, performed by lay and clerical healers alike, was to make the sign of the cross (“segnare”) over the afflicted part of the body.\textsuperscript{45}

\textbf{Mythologies of witchcraft}

Italian judges conducted some of the earliest witchcraft trials, providing important evidence of a wide variety of beliefs which theologians progressively reduced into the mold of the diabolical witch. While the richness of this documentation has attracted considerable attention, the complexity of the witchcraft construct and its multiple local variants still pose a serious challenge to any attempts at synthesis.

In a particularly significant cluster of early cases from Todi and Perugia between 1428 and 1455, a few women confessed to flying at night, entering people’s homes in the shape of cats, and killing babies by sucking their blood. Such vampire-witches operated individually, while their collective gathering at the walnut tree of Benevento was not very significant. Richard Kieckhefer classifies these trials as one basic form of witchcraft mythology, reminiscent of the \textit{striges} from classical antiquity, in which the devil was confined to a minor role. Kieckhefer also highlights another type of “Sabbath narrative”, whose core feature was a nocturnal meeting, referred to in Latin as \textit{ludus} (in Italian \textit{gioco}, game) or as \textit{cursus} (in the vernacular \textit{corso}, course or ride): a sort of pleasant banquet presided over not by the devil, but by a benevolent female figure, known as \textit{Domina ludi/cursus} (lady of the game/course). This second version is found in a sizable series of trials in the Po River valley area, where apparently many people still recognized the \textit{Domina} as a sort of deity of abundance and fertility as late as the first half of the sixteenth century. A peculiar feature in some of these accounts is the swoon, a sort of trance which women and men would fall into before they experienced the \textit{ludus} and the meeting with the \textit{Domina}.\textsuperscript{44} Such an element suggests a comparison between this paradigm and the mythology of the \textit{benandanti}, the atypical witches from the north-eastern region of Friuli made famous by Ginzburg’s pioneering book, \textit{The Night Battles}. Male \textit{benandanti}, all “born with the caul” (that is, still wrapped in the amniotic sac), confessed to falling into a sleep so deep they could not be woken up, and going “in spirit” to collectively fight witches. Their battles, which would take place during the nights of the so-called Ember days, were crucial: the victory of the \textit{benandanti} would bring plentiful crops, whereas that of the witches spelled famine.\textsuperscript{45} Female \textit{benandanti} would see and talk to the souls of the dead, receiving information about the living and relating it back to their fellow villagers. The belief in a female figure with supernatural powers who could communicate with the dead led Ginzburg to connect the \textit{benandanti} with the cult of the fertility goddesses mentioned earlier. This sort of double-sided north Italian witchcraft construct thus had a wide diffusion as well as significant features in common with the Umbrian paradigm, such as the marginal role of the devil. Furthermore, cases such as that of Orsolina “la Rossa” (Modena, 1539) show that elements from the Umbrian model of the “vampire witch” could coexist with elements stemming from the “fertility goddess” strand, and suggest that different mythologies of witchcraft could
overlap. At the same time, they confirm Martine Ostorero’s thesis that in the Italian peninsula the stereotypical witches’ Sabbat had been grafted onto a folkloric sub-stratum stronger, and more markedly different from demonological theories, than in Northern Europe. This is particularly evident in the case of the Sicilian donne di fora (“the ladies from outside”), supernatural creatures best described as “fairies”, which testifies to a folkloric belief-complex largely alien to witchcraft mythology. Between the sixteenth and the seventeenth century the Spanish Inquisition, active in Sicily during the early modern era, tried eighty people (90% women), who told of going “in spirit” to meetings as far away as Naples, where the female leader of the donne (sometimes referred to as “the queen”) presided over a splendid banquet, and instructed attendees in the use of medicinal herbs. The human participants (often also referred to, confusingly, as donne di fora) then received the power to heal the sick and cure the bewitched. Repression was moderate and did not seem to produce long-term results, since Sicilians continued to believe in both spiritual and human donne di fora well into the twentieth century.

Conclusions

The witch hunt in Italy was a limited phenomenon, both chronologically and geographically, although it reached high levels in some periods and in specific areas. It was intense and relatively widespread in its early phase (1480s–1520s), but it declined, as far as death sentences are concerned, already from the end of the sixteenth century. Mass prosecutions continued, in some Alpine territories, until the middle of the seventeenth century, mostly at the hands of secular authorities. However, they remained peripheral events and never affected the central and southern regions of the Peninsula to a significant extent.

The main reasons for this are probably to be found in the overall attitude of the Catholic Church towards magic and witchcraft, as well as in the setup of the Inquisition and its transformations. Italian church leaders were apparently slow in accepting the new witchcraft construct in the course of the fifteenth century. They mostly hung on to the traditional positions enshrined in Scholastic theology and canon law, and thus continued to regard the demonic feats of supposed night-flying witches as little more than delusions. The major exception to this situation was represented by members of the Mendicant orders, Franciscan and especially Dominican friars, who were the protagonists of the first wave of the witch hunt.

After a lull in the central decades of the sixteenth century caused by the outbreak of the Protestant Reformation, which monopolized the attention of church authorities, inquisitors returned to the prosecution of magic and witchcraft in a much changed scenario during the Catholic Reformation (or Counter Reformation). Following the Council of Trent (concluded in 1563), the new policy of the church emphasized the need of reforming the religious beliefs and practices of the Italian people. While this goal certainly required the uprooting of magic, it was pursued neither by discouraging belief in it nor by treating harshly those who used it, but by redirecting their demand of supernatural protection towards church-sponsored alternatives. Upgraded Catholic rituals, the sacramentals (which included exorcism), administered by appropriately trained clergy, were to replace magical remedies to illness and misfortune. While any abuse of holy words or rites by wizards and sorceresses was punished, the practice of magic
in itself was not automatically regarded as evidence of membership in the witches’ sect.\textsuperscript{50} Trials for “superstitions”, as magical techniques were often held by inquisitors, were one of the tools used by the church to reaffirm its leadership in Italian society, and reached impressive numbers, but they usually ended with mild sentences and seldom escalated into large witch hunts.\textsuperscript{51} These were left mostly to the initiative of local secular courts, or occasionally of church judges (though not inquisitors), and did not disappear very soon. Indeed, the Holy Office, while adopting early a moderate stance in the repression of witchcraft, did nothing to encourage Italian governments and rulers to implement similar policies, and only rarely intervened to restrain the excesses of the worst witch-panics.

Notes
3 The two women were tried by the inquisitor of Milan: Luisa Muraro, \textit{La Signora del Gioco: caccia alle streghe interpretata dalle sue vittime} (Milan: La Tartaruga, 2006). We know of several trials by secular courts against practitioners of demonic magic (both male and female) in Firenze and Perugia, which ended with the death penalty in the course of the fourteenth and in the early fifteenth century: see Dinora Corsi, \textit{Diaboliche, maledette e disperate} (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2013). I have included these death sentences (five) in my total count of the victims of the witch hunt.
11 Del Col, \textit{L’Inquisizione}, 210–211. It is worth noting that from the 1470s until the 1530s, the number of executions per decade had never been lower than twelve, thus making the drop from the 1530s to the 1570s all the more evident.

14 Matteo Duni, *Under the Devil’s Spell. Witches, Sorcerers, and the Inquisition in Renaissance Italy* (Florence: Syracuse University, 2007), 34. Figures are drawn, with minor modifications, from *I processi del tribunale dell’Inquisizione di Modena. Inventario generale analitico, 1489–1784*, ed. Giuseppe Trenti (Modena: Aedes Muratoriana, 2003), 49–54, and include investigations not leading to formal trials. Such marked increase was certainly due also to the raising of Modena to the status of main inquisitorial tribunal from that of vicariate, so that over forty cases were brought before the inquisitor in the year 1600 alone.


16 The Val Leventina is now in the Canton Ticino but was then part of the Canton of Uri (and of the archdiocese of Milan *in spiritualibus*).


18 Loriga, “A Secret”.


22 Del Col, “L’attività,” 392–393, also proposes a range between 60,000 and 100,000 as the grand total of all accusations and dossiers (including those which were not made into formal trials).


24 Duni, *Devil’s Spell*, 71.


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39 Duni, *Devil’s Spell*, 52.
41 Written sources of magic, however, did not all belong to the more sophisticated tradition of ritualistic, astral magic (such as the originally Arabic *Picatrix*), but often consisted in compilations of recipes and experiments for a variety of purposes, from household management, to craftmanship, to practical jokes, some of which had a marked magical character. On this genre of texts see Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
45 These were four “festivities which had survived from an ancient agricultural calendar cycle and which were eventually incorporated in the Christian calendar”, Ginzburg, *The Night Battles*, 22.
48 Gustav Henningsen, “The Ladies from Outside. An Archaic Pattern of the Witches’ Sabbath,” in *Early Modern European Witchcraft*, 191–215; figures are drawn from Messana, *Inquisitori*, 550–569, which provides the most complete (if not always convincing) analysis of this belief-complex available.
51 Romeo, “Inquisitori domenica.”

Bibliography (selection)