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# Spanish Persecution of the 15th-17th Centuries: A Study of Discrimination Against Witches at the Local and State Levels

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**Spanish Persecution of the 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> Centuries:  
A Study of Discrimination Against Witches at the Local and State Levels**

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An Honors Thesis

Submitted for partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with honors in History  
from Hamline University

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## Introduction

In 1591 in the Spanish region of Toledo, three women were arrested and accused of witchcraft by the local vicar.<sup>1</sup> The arrest was the result of accusations made by sixteen people who claimed to have witnessed the three women, Catalina Matheo, Joana Izquierda and Olalla Sobrina performing acts of magic.<sup>2</sup> Five children had died in the village of Cazar in the past few years, leading the villagers to suspect magic was to blame.<sup>3</sup> The vicar arrested the women and tortured them separately, until Catalina Metheo cracked. Metheo admitted she was a witch and stated Joana Izquierda and Olalla Sobrina also practiced magic. Joana Izquierda eventually admitted to being “forcibly anointed” by other witches and taken to a field to dance.<sup>4</sup> She also told the vicar about the deaths of the children, though Izquierda claimed she did not help kill them.<sup>5</sup> At this point, the vicar turned the case over to the Inquisitor tribunal in Toledo.<sup>6</sup>

The tribunal questioned the three women again before they were sentenced. Once they were in front of the Spanish Inquisition, Metheo and Izquierda denounced their original confessions. The women claimed to have made those statements because they feared torture at the hands of the vicar.<sup>7</sup> The Spanish Inquisition decided to give each woman a separate sentence. Catalina Matheo was sentenced to two hundred lashes, to wear the insignia of a witch and to publicly state that she was not a heretic.<sup>8</sup> All of these

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Charles Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain, Volume 4* (New York: AMS Press, 1988) p. 223.

<sup>2</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 223.

<sup>3</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 223.

<sup>4</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 224.

<sup>5</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 224.

<sup>6</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 224.

<sup>7</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 224.

<sup>8</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 224.

punishments were to be done at an *auto de fé*, a public event where individuals accused of heresy were either killed or forced to do penance for their crimes. Joana Izquierda and Olalla Sobrina were also required to attend the *auto de fé* to atone for participating in heretical acts.

The sentences Catalina Matheo, Joana Izquierda and Olalla Sobrina received were considered mild for the time period. Cases of witchcraft in Europe were often punishable by death or extreme torture. The methods of torture and execution for witches were gruesome, including stretching the accused on the rack and being burned at the stake. The Spanish Inquisition is well known for its harsh treatment of Jews and Muslims, however the Inquisition rarely sentenced people accused of witchcraft to death without ample proof. In regards to witch trials, the Spanish Inquisitors were tamer in their punishments compared to the rest of Europe, if they punished the accused at all. The trial of Catalina Matheo, Joana Izquierda and Olalla Sobrina is just one example of how the Spanish Inquisitors would handle cases of witchcraft.

The Spanish Inquisition was first established in 1478 during the reign of Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile. The monarchs instructed the Inquisition to root out heresy and ensure recent converts remained faithful to Catholicism. The Spanish monarchy, which officially mandated and controlled the Inquisition, forced Non-Catholics to convert or depart the country. Spanish witches were targeted on a smaller scale than the Jews and Muslims living in the regions, but they were nonetheless hunted, questioned and tortured during the existence of the Spanish Inquisition. However, the Spanish did not hunt and kill witches with the same ferocity as the rest of Europe. In fact, the Inquisitors stopped

or limited the scope of many witch trials that occurred in the Spanish regions throughout the existence of the Spanish Inquisition.

At the beginning of their reign, Isabella I and Ferdinand II struggled to unite the Spanish regions. It was a time of transition for the Spanish governments of Castile, Leon and Aragon. Prior to the marriage of Isabella I and Ferdinand II, no monarch had controlled such a vast area. Each region had a king or queen, but the feudal lords held the majority of the power. Before the marriage of Isabella I and Ferdinand II, none of the Spanish regions were united under one government. The feudal lords would often fight or argue in order to maintain control over their region. When the lords did work together for the betterment of all parties, it would generally only last for a brief amount of time. In 1474, Isabella I became Queen of Castile and had to fend off the numerous plots created to force her off the throne. As the half sister of the previous king, some people did not believe Isabella I was the rightful ruler. The Portuguese royal family and a few Spanish Castilian lords attempted to overthrow Isabella by having King Alfonso V of Portugal marry Joanna, the daughter of the previous ruler of Castile.<sup>9</sup> A war lasting from 1475 to 1476 between Castile and Portugal resulted in Isabella I keeping the throne. Numerous rebellions against the rule of Ferdinand II and Isabella I occurred before 1478, causing the monarchs to look for ways to further legitimize their rule. As they began to develop laws to keep their subjects safe, Isabella I and Ferdinand II turned their attention to fixing the structure of their governments.<sup>10</sup> Ferdinand II and Isabella I worked with the nobles to improve the finances and governmental procedures of the courts, but they also began to focus on maintaining a

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<sup>9</sup> Ierne L. Plunkett, *Isabel of Castile and the Spanish Nation*, (New York: New York Putnam, 1915), p. 96.

<sup>10</sup> John Edwards, *Ferdinand and Isabella*, (London: Pearson & Longman, 2005), p. 28.

Catholic majority in their kingdoms. To do this, the monarchs decided to force Spanish Jews and Muslims to leave the regions. If they failed to leave, Jews and Muslims were compelled to convert.<sup>11</sup> After the Spanish Inquisition was created in 1478, Inquisitors persecuted individuals who continued to practice their religion in secret.

The Spanish Inquisition did not officially end until 1834, however many of the most notorious witch trials in the Spanish regions occurred from the early 1500s until the mid 1600s. This paper will only analyze witch trials from the first half of the Spanish Inquisition. During that time, it was common throughout Europe to burn or drown witches, which makes the actions of the Spanish Inquisitors even more unusual. Witchcraft in the Spanish regions during the Spanish Inquisition is a subject that has been neglected by many historians. There are few researchers who have studied the reasons why the Inquisitors did not persecute witches on a massive scale or why they often released the accused after they were questioned about practicing witchcraft. The historians who have studied the matter view it as a small piece of the Spanish Inquisition, a subject that does not require more than a chapter or two in a book. In fact, the treatment of witches by the Inquisition is an important part of the story of the Spanish Inquisition.

The Spanish Inquisitors are infamous for their brutality towards minority groups and harsh death sentences. The countless deaths that occurred during the Spanish Inquisition make it one of the most famous instances of religious persecution. These are the ideas that come to mind when one thinks of the Spanish Inquisition. The Inquisitors are well known for harming the Spanish Jews and Muslims because of their faith. Throughout the Spanish Inquisition, the two minority groups struggled to practice their faith while they

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<sup>11</sup>Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 1998), p. 30.

worried about persecution from the Spanish government. The Spanish Inquisition was cruel to Jews and Muslims, however this was not the way they treated all non-Catholics. To better understand how the Spanish Inquisition operated and why it was allowed to continue for more than two hundred and fifty years, it is necessary to examine the treatment of witches.

This paper will help to erase common misconceptions about the cruelty of the Spanish Inquisition and its response to cases of witchcraft that occurred in the Spanish regions. Witch trials in the Spanish regions from 1478 until 1650 will be analyzed to determine the techniques most often used by the Inquisitors and the secular courts when they interrogated people accused of witchcraft. Contrary to popular thought, the Spanish Inquisitors usually treated cases of witchcraft with tolerance. The secular courts in the Spanish villages and towns were much harsher than the Spanish Inquisitors when handling cases of witchcraft. The secular tribunals acted as the government for specific towns or areas in the Spanish regions. Oftentimes, the secular tribunals were the first officials to question the accused before the Inquisitors arrived to interview the suspect or declare the final verdict. The secular courts were more likely to sentence a witch to death in comparison to the Spanish Inquisitors. The relatively tolerant actions of the Spanish Inquisitors as they handled cases of witchcraft will be described throughout. The Spanish Inquisitors used some of the methods established by the Medieval Inquisition and the Catholic Church, but also began to develop their own methods of questioning as time went on.

The Catholic Church and the Medieval Inquisition will be referred to throughout this paper. It is important to note that while the Catholic Church is referred to in broad terms,



the author is aware that there are many nuances throughout this time period related to how the Catholic Church operated. Not all Catholic officials followed the edicts published by the papacy and there were differences in how popes handled witchcraft during the first half of the Spanish Inquisition. The Catholic Church and its Inquisition were not necessarily as unified as some of the language in this paper would suggest. However, the focus of this paper is on the Spanish Inquisition and witchcraft, rather than the subtle differences of the Catholic Church. Therefore, the author feels it is acceptable to use general terms to an extent when describing the Catholic Church. This paper will explore why differences in witchcraft sentencing existed between the secular courts and the Spanish Inquisition. It will also explain the reasons why a person would have been accused of witchcraft.

### **Historiography**

The Spanish Inquisition has been the subject of numerous scholarly works over the years. The bulk of the research primarily focuses on the treatment of Jews and Muslims by the Inquisition, rather than the persecution and questioning of Spanish witches. When Spanish witchcraft is mentioned in a text, the information will often be limited. However, there is a small group of historians who have focused on witchcraft. These historians have translated numerous primary source documents from Spanish to English in order to add to the general knowledge about witchcraft during the Spanish Inquisition.

As a researcher who only reads English, I have relied on secondary sources for my primary source material. However, many of the secondary sources I have used include excerpts from personal letters or journals of Inquisitors, parts of the official record from the Inquisition trials and written accounts from witnesses who claim to have seen magic.

These excerpts, along with the insights from the secondary source authors, provided me with primary and secondary sources.

These sources focus on Spanish witchcraft in particular regions like the Basque region, examine witchcraft across Europe and analyze the entire Spanish Inquisition. The historians who have contributed knowledge and unique insight to the subject of the Spanish witch-hunts from 1478 to 1650 include Gustav Henningsen, Anne Llewellyn Barstow and Henry Kamen, among others. The main aspects of Spanish witchcraft studied by these historians include witness testimony from witch trials, the verdicts given to people accused of witchcraft and the persecution of witches by the Spanish Inquisition as well as secular tribunals. The reasons why the Spanish witch-hunts resulted in fewer deaths and lighter sentences are also discussed in the secondary sources.

In 1980, Gustav Henningsen wrote *The Witches' Advocate: Basque Witchcraft and the Spanish Inquisition (1609-1614)*. His book provides detailed examples from witch trials in the Basque region with direct excerpts from the records of the witch trials. Henningsen uses an Inquisition report written by Inquisitor Alonso de Salazar Frías at the time of the Basque trials to examine how confessions of witchcraft were obtained and the reasons why people may have accused their neighbors, friends or family members of practicing magic. The issue of false testimony is discussed in the text, with Henningsen describing the methods interrogators used to force a confession from individuals accused of witchcraft. He argues that the methods used by the secular courts, which included forms of physical or psychological torture, caused the accused to admit to crimes of witchcraft they did not actually commit. One of these tactics was the deliberate decision by the secular courts to

withhold the reason why a person was being questioned.<sup>12</sup> The accounts of the interrogation tactics used by the Inquisition provide Henningsen with evidence to support his theories. The numerous examples Henningsen provides throughout the text to support his argument gives researchers a better understanding of why witchcraft was considered a severe crime during the early 17<sup>th</sup> century in the northern Spanish regions. However, Henningsen fails to discuss the events leading up to the Basque trials, meaning readers will need to use other sources to truly understand why the Basque trials occurred on such a large scale and why the punishments were so severe compared to the other Spanish witch trials.

Cecil Roth explores the origins of Inquisition interrogation tactics in his book *The Spanish Inquisition*. He begins by describing the interrogation techniques used by Catholic Inquisitors in the Middle Ages. Roth explains that in the early 1500s the Spanish Inquisitors adopted the same interrogation tactics used by the Medieval Inquisitors during the Middle Ages. The practice of burning witches alive started in the Middle Ages and was adopted by the Spanish Inquisitors and secular tribunals in the Spanish regions. Roth explains that unlike the secular tribunals in the Spanish regions, the Spanish Inquisition “had rules for the evaluation of evidence”, which they adhered to for every case of witchcraft.<sup>13</sup> He claims the rules created by the Suprema, the head tribunal of the Inquisition, ensured that individuals accused of witchcraft would not be killed without a thorough investigation. The secular tribunals were much less methodical, resulting in many unnecessary deaths throughout the existence of the Spanish Inquisition. Roth provides important knowledge

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<sup>12</sup> Gustav Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate: Basque Witchcraft and the Spanish Inquisition, 1609-1614*, (Reno: University of Nevada, 1980), p. 40.

<sup>13</sup> Cecil Roth, *The Spanish Inquisition* (New York: Norton, 1964) p. 200.

about the background of interrogation techniques, but he does not provide examples of the interrogation techniques or explain what the rules of interrogation were.

In *A History of the Inquisition of Spain, Volume 4* Henry Charles Lea contributes more information about the interrogation practices of Inquisitors. Lea claims that individuals who were first accused and later acquitted of witchcraft charges did not have their property seized by the Inquisition or the Spanish crown.<sup>14</sup> To have property seized by the government during a witch investigation was a common practice in Europe during the time of the Spanish Inquisition. The fact that the Inquisitors were instructed to forgo this practice shows the Spanish Inquisition used different methods to find and condemn witches than other countries at the time. Besides the origins of Inquisition interrogation tactics, the author also analyzes the reasons why the Spanish were more tolerant of magic than other countries in Europe. Lea examines the mindset of the Spanish during the Middle Ages to develop his theory. He believes “the medieval spirit of toleration” for astrology and occult arts remained in the Spanish regions after the end of the Middle Ages, while the rest of Europe began to fear magic.<sup>15</sup> In addition to these statements, the author calls the witchcraft policy developed by the Inquisition contradictory because the Spanish Inquisitors dismissed witch rituals as a delusion, but they still wanted to charge people suspected of practicing witchcraft with heresy.<sup>16</sup> Lea gives a detailed account of the inner workings of the Spanish Inquisition, describing how the Inquisitors reached decisions and explaining what rules were in place to ensure fair treatment of the accused. Lea does not focus as much on the subject of witchcraft as he does on other subjects related to the

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<sup>14</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 236.

<sup>15</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 180.

<sup>16</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 210.

Spanish Inquisition, however this book is still one of the best resources for the topic of Spanish witchcraft during the Spanish Inquisition.

Another important source that examines the policies and practices of the Spanish Inquisitors is the article 'Inquisitors, Priests, and the People during the Catholic Reformation in Spain' by Sara T. Nalle. In the article, Nalle provides information about *comisarios*, non-salaried officials who assisted Inquisitors with their investigations across the Spanish regions. Nalle explains that the Spanish Inquisitors were able to prosecute a greater number of cases after 1561 because the *comisarios* helped with the workload.<sup>17</sup> According to the author, the Spanish Inquisition was successful because local administrations were established in the towns during the late 1400s to early 1500s to support the efforts of the Inquisition. Nalle also notes that beginning in 1547, the Spanish Inquisition began "the restructuring of its administration and policy goals".<sup>18</sup> She argues this restructuring widened the reach of the Inquisition and caused the Inquisitors to focus more attention on witchcraft cases, instead of only prosecuting Jews and Muslims. Nalle provides useful insight on the restructuring of the Spanish Inquisition. Her research on the *comisarios* is important, but she does not make connections in her article to specific cases *comisarios* were used in. Nalle does not use primary sources to provide support to her statements about the importance of the *comisarios* in the Spanish regions either.

Henry Kamen wrote two notable books on the Spanish Inquisition, *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision* and *Inquisition and Society in Spain: In the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. In these texts, Kamen examines a few of the most well known cases

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<sup>17</sup> Sara T. Nalle, 'Inquisitors, Priests, and the People during the Catholic Reformation in Spain', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 18.4 (1987) p. 559.

<sup>18</sup> Nalle, 'Inquisitors, Priests, and the People', p. 558.

of witch mania in the Spanish regions. The witch trials in the regions of Navarre and Catalonia are discussed in both books. Kamen provides statistics on the number of witches killed as well as personal accounts from both people accused of witchcraft and their accusers. Kamen includes excerpts from primary sources in these books, such as the instructions written by the Suprema in 1614 to explain the policy for cases of witchcraft. The Suprema was located in Madrid and was the head tribunal of the Inquisition. These texts give a detailed description of the Navarre witch trials as well as the aftermath of the trials. Without the in-depth information from Kamen about the decision making process of the Inquisition, historians would not have a clear understanding of how the Suprema operated. Kamen provides more detail about how the Spanish Inquisition dealt with witch-hunts than most writers, however he does not offer as much insight into how secular tribunals operated as he does for the Inquisition. A lack of research on secular courts and the effect they had on the witch trials in Navarre as well as other regions creates a gap in the knowledge about Spanish witch-hunts.

Anne Barstow analyzes witchcraft throughout Europe in her book *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts*. Barstow focuses on Spanish witch trials during the time of the Spanish Inquisition for only a small portion of her book. Nonetheless, her conclusions offer important insights as to why women who were accused of witchcraft in the Spanish regions were given lesser punishments compared to women in other parts of Europe. Barstow agrees with Kamen that the Spanish were less concerned with witchcraft compared to the rest of Europe because they could blame the Jewish and Muslim populations for regional problems. She draws her own conclusions as well, stating that at the time Spanish culture highly valued women as mothers and wives; Spanish men were

unwilling to accuse their own women of witchcraft.<sup>19</sup> Barstow reasons that because family was an important part of Spanish life and women could bear children, Spanish men were unwilling to persecute Christian Spanish women.<sup>20</sup> Spanish men saw women as carriers of their family bloodlines, meaning they had an important role in the family. However, Barstow does not offer an explanation as to why Spanish men cared more about their women than men in other areas throughout Europe. In addition to this idea, Barstow offers another explanation as to why the witch-hunts were less severe in the Spanish regions compared to other areas of Europe. Barstow claims the Spanish in the southern regions did not believe in “harmful magic”, meaning they did not connect unfortunate circumstances to witchcraft.<sup>21</sup> She does not offer an explanation as to why this is the case, which is one of the shortcomings of this text. Barstow offers few of her own ideas on Spanish witchcraft; instead she depends on the work of other historians for explanations and examples of witchcraft in the Spanish regions.

The text *The Spanish Inquisition* by Helen Rawlings offers an overview of the Spanish Inquisition. The author provides insight into the plight of Spanish witches in the sixth chapter, which focuses on forms of minor heresy. Rawlings makes the important point that traditional pagan beliefs were an important part of Spanish culture at the time of the Spanish Inquisition. Rawlings writes that these traditional beliefs “did not challenge orthodox practice, but rather ran parallel to it”.<sup>22</sup> The author backs this distinction with an example from a popular Spanish story that has a Spanish witch as the protagonist who

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<sup>19</sup> Anne Llewellyn Barstow, *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts*. (San Francisco: Pandora, 1994) p. 93.

<sup>20</sup> Barstow, *Witchcraze*, p. 93.

<sup>21</sup> Barstow, *Witchcraze*, p. 31.

<sup>22</sup> Helen Rawlings, *The Spanish Inquisition* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2006) p. 128.

helps two lovers reunite. Rawlings also makes the distinction between two types of magic, ritualistic magic and petty magic, and explains why the Spanish Inquisitors believed ritualistic magic posed more of a threat to the Spanish regions than petty magic. Rawlings gives a brief but nevertheless insightful explanation of witch trials during the time of the Spanish Inquisition. The author relies heavily on the research of other scholars, even though she can read Spanish. If Rawlings had chosen to read more of the primary sources on Spanish witchcraft, then she would have been able to offer more information on the subject of witchcraft.

### **Origins of the Spanish Inquisition**

The Spanish Inquisition was originally modeled after the Medieval Inquisition, which was established by the Catholic Church around 1184. The primary task of the Medieval Inquisition was similar to the task of the Spanish Inquisition, to find and punish heretics. The qualifications for being a heretic differed throughout the existence of the Medieval Inquisition, but the main indicator was religious affiliation. The Medieval Inquisition acted as a grand jury and was instructed to only investigate baptized Catholics who suspected of heresy.<sup>23</sup> The Medieval Inquisition also persecuted witches, partially because they were heretics and partially because the Catholic Church feared them. The Catholic Church did not want the common man believing there was another higher power outside of God and the Church. The people living in the Spanish regions were predominantly Catholic, so the Catholic Church did not have a pressing need to send

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<sup>23</sup>Edward Peters, *Inquisition* (New York: Free Press, 1988), p. 57.



Inquisitors there immediately after the Medieval Inquisition was created. The Medieval Inquisition eventually arrived in the region of Aragon in 1238, during the time of Pope Gregory IX. The Medieval Inquisitors worked closely with the regional rulers to discover heretics. By the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Medieval Inquisition lost power in Aragon, due to inactivity.<sup>24</sup> The Medieval Inquisition never spread to Castile, meaning that region did not experience an Inquisition until Isabella I came to power during the later half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>25</sup>

The marriage of Isabella I and Ferdinand II in 1469 united a number of the larger Spanish regions. This marriage is considered to be the beginning of modern Spain, however total unification would not occur until centuries later. The two monarchs ruled over Castile, Aragon, Sicily and Leon together. Each region had its own government and feudal lords, who reported to the two monarchs. With their union, Isabella and Ferdinand controlled the majority of the Spanish regions, making them far more powerful than the feudal lords who ruled the other regions. The years preceding the reign of Isabella I and Ferdinand II in Castile and Aragon had been tumultuous, leading the monarchs to search for ways to pacify the nobles and the common people in the area.<sup>26</sup> One of the methods the young monarchs used to unite the regions was to create their own Inquisition. Isabella I and Ferdinand II wanted to be able to persecute Jews, Muslims and heretics living on their land to ensure Catholicism remained the dominant religion. The two rulers were devoted to Catholicism, but they also wanted to protect their thrones. By forcing people to convert and maintaining a Catholic majority in the regions, the king and queen probably thought their reign would

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<sup>24</sup> Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition* (New York: New American Library, 1966) p. 43.

<sup>25</sup> Kamen *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 43.

<sup>26</sup> Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 14.

be secure from rebellion. But before the monarchs could create an Inquisition, they needed papal approval. At first, Pope Sixtus IV was reluctant to grant their request.<sup>27</sup> However, once Ferdinand II threatened to withdraw his soldiers from Rome, who were stationed there to protect the Pope from a possible attack by Turkish invaders, the Pope reconsidered. Pope Sixtus IV gave his approval for the creation of the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition on 1 November 1478. The papal decree granting the approval, *Exigit Sinceras Devotionis Affectus*, stated that Isabella I and Ferdinand II had the right to choose their own Inquisitors in the Spanish regions without interference from the Catholic Church.<sup>28</sup>

Shortly after the decree was published, Isabella I and Ferdinand II appointed Tomás de Torquemada, a Spanish Dominican friar as the first Grand Inquisitor of the Inquisition.<sup>29</sup> As the Grand Inquisitor, Tomás de Torquemada was the head official for the Spanish Inquisition. The Grand Inquisitor managed the activities of the Inquisitors, oversaw the creation of Inquisition policies, was in charge of making the final decision for tied court cases and acted as the primary liaison for the Inquisition with the Spanish lords and monarchs. Not all of these roles were officially declared immediately after the appointment of Tomás de Torquemada, but they did emerge over time with the approval of the monarchy. The Inquisition under the control of the monarchy “uniquely combined a medieval heresy tribunal with the modern force of the state”.<sup>30</sup> It was not until two years after the appointment of Tomás de Torquemada that two other Inquisitors were appointed

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<sup>27</sup> Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 44.

<sup>28</sup> Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 44.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Pérez, *The Spanish Inquisition: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2005) p. 102.

<sup>30</sup> Rainer Decker, *Witchcraft and the Papacy: An Account Drawing on the Formerly Secret Records of the Roman Inquisition* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2008) p. 80.

to the Spanish Inquisition. Dominican monks Miguel de Morillo and Juan de San Martín were appointed as Inquisitors on 27 September 1480. On 11 February 1486, Pope Innocent VIII made Tomás de Torquemada the Grand Inquisitor for all of the Spanish territories that were under the control of Ferdinand II and Isabella I, which expanded the reach of the Spanish Inquisition beyond Aragon and Castile.<sup>31</sup> The power of the Inquisition was growing, however the early Inquisitors could not persecute individuals who were not baptized as Christians.<sup>32</sup> Enacted by Isabella I and Ferdinand II, this rule kept individuals who continued to practice pagan religions safe from the Inquisition for the first few years of its existence.<sup>33</sup> Spanish people who practiced or believed in magic were allowed to do so without fear of punishment.

### **Identifying a Witch**

At the time of the Spanish Inquisition, the concept of magic was already well known throughout society. Europeans were exposed to witchcraft during the Middle Ages, a period that ended only a few decades before the rise of the Spanish Inquisition. The Medieval Inquisition had set the precedent for hunting and killing witches, in addition to creating a list of traits a witch could possess. Leaders of the Catholic Church associated pagan religions and magic with demons, claiming that those who practiced paganism were working for the devil and therefore must be a witch.<sup>34</sup> This notion began early on during

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<sup>31</sup> Pérez, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 102.

<sup>32</sup> Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 44.

<sup>33</sup> Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 44.

<sup>34</sup> Michael D. Bailey, 'The Age of Magicians: Periodization in the History of European Magic', *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*, 3.1, (2008), p. 4.

the Middle Ages. The Catholic Church chose to classify witches as a person who “has abandoned Christianity, has renounced her baptism, has worshipped Satan as her God, has surrendered herself to him, body and soul and exists only to be his instrument”.<sup>35</sup> Once the Spanish Inquisition began, Inquisitors used this knowledge to persecute witches.

Association with the devil was a well-known indicator of witchcraft. The devil would take the form of a “black cat, a ram, or a bear” during a Sabbat, a gathering of witches.<sup>36</sup> Once the devil appeared at the Sabbat, it would tell the witches that were present how to perform specific acts of magic or ask them to complete a task.<sup>37</sup> The opinion that women were “morally and intellectually weaker than men” was common in the Spanish regions, resulting in a greater number of women being accused of cavorting with the devil at a Sabbat compared to men.<sup>38</sup> At the time, people believed that a weaker intellect made you more susceptible to “temptations of the Devil”.<sup>39</sup>

When an individual was suspected of witchcraft, Inquisitors would question them about the Sabbat. If the accused could tell the Inquisitor details about the witch gatherings and the details matched the accounts from other known witches, then the accused was more likely to be given a harsher punishment. The possible existence of the Sabbat was a common debate throughout Europe in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. At that time, the Catholic Church believed in the existence of the Sabbat. However, many learned Spaniards were reluctant to believe that witches gathered to talk to the devil and practice magic.<sup>40</sup> Spanish Bishop Alonso Fernández de Madrigal was one of the skeptics. In 1436, he declared the Sabbat was

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<sup>35</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 206.

<sup>36</sup> Decker, *Witchcraft and the Papacy*, p. 44.

<sup>37</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 215.

<sup>38</sup> Stephen Haliczer, *Inquisition and Society in the Kingdom of Valencia, 1478-1834* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1990) p. 146.

<sup>39</sup> Haliczer, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 146.

<sup>40</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 209.

“a delusion caused by the inunction of drugs”, not an actual meeting with Satan.<sup>41</sup> Other Spaniards did believe in the existence of the Sabbat, like the Royal Council in Pamplona.

The council thought witches “could be carried through the air to the Sabbat”.<sup>42</sup>

Disagreement on the subject of the Sabbat existed long before the Spanish Inquisition began, which means skepticism about magic existed then as well. The fact that many Spanish academics doubted the existence of the Sabbat is remarkable, considering that some of the clergy members of Catholic Church did believe it. The Spanish regions were predominantly Catholic, so to doubt the existence of witches meant you did not fully agree with the Catholic Church. Spanish clergymen who did not believe in witches or certain aspects of witchcraft were actually ignoring the teachings of the Church, an institution they were part of. The debate about the existence of witches would continue once the Spanish Inquisition came to power and help to shape its official statements about what traits witches were known to possess.

Flying was another familiar aspect of witchcraft. It was a common belief that witches could use the fat from an infant to brew a flying potion, requiring the witch to kill the child.<sup>43</sup> Another way witches were thought to fly was by having sex with the devil. This popular accusation led to the deaths of many women and men throughout Europe.

Fortunately for Spanish women, theologians and bishops in the Spanish regions believed that “flying through the air and copulation with the devil was a delusion to be pitied rather than punished”.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 209.

<sup>42</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 214.

<sup>43</sup> Decker, *Witchcraft and the Papacy*, p. 44.

<sup>44</sup> Henry Arthur Francis Kamen, *Inquisition and Society in Spain: In the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London: Widenfeld & Nicolson, 1985) p. 210.

Besides flying and fraternizing with the devil, there were a few other ways a person could accurately identify a witch. Individuals who were suspected of killing children, who kissed black cats during a Sabbat and were suspected of poisoning people by feeding them a green-colored soup made of the heart of a child as well as toads were believed to be practicing magic.<sup>45</sup> A person suspected of witchcraft might have their left eye examined by a witch expert who could look for the mark of the devil in the eye and determine guilt or innocence.<sup>46</sup> If the mark was found, the accused would be guilty of witchcraft. Children could also become witches or be forced into helping witches.

In 1622, there was a case of sorcery reported to an Inquisition tribunal in Castile that involved a woman who had been forced to practice magic as a child. A young woman named Casilda de Pabanas presented herself to the tribunal to confess that when she was twelve, she had met the devil and helped a witch. At the time, Casilda de Pabanas had been sick with a fever and stayed at home while her parents went to mass.<sup>47</sup> While she was at home, a widow from the village named Marina Bela had appeared at her bedside and forced the girl to accompany her to meet the devil in a nearby village.<sup>48</sup> The young girl saw the devil as a “tall naked man, dark and with horns like a bull”.<sup>49</sup> She claimed these meetings happened several times, with the devil appearing in the form of a goat.<sup>50</sup> The devil gave her the ability to summon a demon by breaking a stick and forced her to kill children with Marina Bela.<sup>51</sup> This account illustrates some of the traits people associated with witches, such as talking to the devil or killing children. In other European countries, this woman

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<sup>45</sup> Pérez, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 79.

<sup>46</sup> Pérez, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 79.

<sup>47</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 238.

<sup>48</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 238.

<sup>49</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 238.

<sup>50</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 238.

<sup>51</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 238.

would have been burnt at the stake or at the very least tortured. Since Casilda de Pabanás had confessed to practicing magic as a young girl, this would have been enough evidence for a death sentence. But the Inquisition absolved her of her sins and sent her on her way.<sup>52</sup> The Inquisitors most likely assumed this woman had delusions as a young girl or remembered dreams that she now believed were actual events from her past. Since no evidence existed so many years later, the Inquisitors would not convict her of a crime. The Inquisitors did not wish to punish a woman when there was little evidence to prove her guilty of practicing witchcraft.

### **The Persecution of Genders**

A common misconception about witch trials is that only women were accused of practicing magic. It is true that more women were accused of witchcraft than men, however that does not mean that men were not targeted. Men who were accused of sorcery were sometimes magicians; entertainers whose art of trickery fooled audiences so well that they believed the magician possessed real supernatural powers. In 1624, Diego de Santa Marta had this happen to him when he performed in a community that accused him of being a witch.<sup>53</sup> Fortunately for the magician, Fray Juan de Saavedra, the man assigned to help him with his defense brought him before members of the *alguazil* of the Holy Tribunal.<sup>54</sup> These lawmen deduced that the acts of magic were simply tricks and they released Diego de Santa

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<sup>52</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 238.

<sup>53</sup> Roth, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 202.

<sup>54</sup> Roth, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 203.

Marta without punishment.<sup>55</sup> Men who were outsiders or travelers like Santa Marta were more likely to be subject to false accusations of witchcraft than men who had lived in the community for a long time. Oftentimes, the only reason a man living in the town or village was accused of witchcraft was if he had a family member who was also under suspicion for practicing magic. Men accused of practicing magic were more likely to be released or receive a lighter sentence compared to women during the Spanish Inquisition. This is evident from the records of the Spanish Inquisition, which show higher numbers of women being executed at trials across the Spanish regions.<sup>56</sup>

Women who were known to be healers and mystics were often arrested and judged by the Inquisition. Healers were called *curandera* or *hechicera*; they created cures “for both physical and psychological ailments”.<sup>57</sup> Reports from women about levitation, bleeding from one side or visions of angels were all claims that worried the Catholic Church.<sup>58</sup> The Church did not necessarily want common people to have a special connection with God outside of the local priests because that threatened the authority of the Catholic Church. These women were accused of practicing and promoting *alumbrado*, a mystical form of Christianity that was prevalent during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>59</sup> Since *alumbrado* was a mystical form of Christianity, the Catholic Church viewed it as heretical. On 23 September 1525 the *Edict of Toledo* was issued, which gave the official perspective of the Catholic Church on mystics.<sup>60</sup> Women who claimed to have visions from God were under suspicion

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<sup>55</sup> Roth, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 203.

<sup>56</sup> Monter, *Frontiers*, P. 326.

<sup>57</sup> Rawlings, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 128.

<sup>58</sup> Clark Colahan, ‘María de Jesús de Agreda’ in *Women in the Inquisition: Spain and the New World*, ed. by Mary E. Giles (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 155.

<sup>59</sup> Mary E. Giles, *Women in the Inquisition: Spain and the New World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999) p. 78.

<sup>60</sup> Giles, *Women in the Inquisition*, p. 78.



because they were not operating within the confines of Church law and might gain followers. The Church was always wary of potential threats that could diminish their power in Europe. During the Spanish Inquisition, there were some religious men who stood up for *alumbrados*. For instance, in April 1529, Franciscan friar Francisco Ortiz publicly spoke out against the prosecution of *alumbrado* Francisca Hernández.<sup>61</sup> After the Inquisition arrested him for speaking out, Ortiz wrote a series of letters to Inquisitor General Alonso Manrique. In this letter, he chastises Manrique for imprisoning Hernández.

“Third, this matter does not belong to your jurisdiction; these disputes do not come before the Holy Inquisition unless someone dogmatizes that a sin is not a sin, and then it is a case for your office, for the punishment of that heresy. And this very clean virgin [Francisca Hernández] of Jesus Christ will never say that a sin is not a sin.”<sup>62</sup>

This source shows that some church officials believed women with religious power were a threat to the authority of the church. The *alumbrados* were people who spoke directly to God, a concept that perturbed the church. The Inquisition was ordered to arrest *alumbrados* by the Catholic Church, which they did on occasion. But unlike the papacy, the Spanish Inquisition viewed magic as part of the culture of the Spanish regions “that did not necessarily challenge orthodox practice, but rather ran parallel to it”.<sup>63</sup>

Unmarried women were usually the first individuals to be suspected of witchcraft once a region was consumed by the desire to find and kill witches. A woman who practiced magic or participated in pagan rituals “became suspect to her neighbors” if she was single

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<sup>61</sup> Francisco Ortiz, ‘Letter from Friar Francisco Ortiz to Inquisitor-General Alonso Manrique, April 9, 1529, Composed inside the Toledo Tribunal of the Inquisition’, in *The Spanish Inquisition, 1478-1614: An Anthology of Sources*, ed. by Lu Ann Homza (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2006) p. 93.

<sup>62</sup> Ortiz, ‘Letter from Friar Francisco Ortiz’, p. 98.

<sup>63</sup> Rawlings, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 128.

or older.<sup>64</sup> Women who became nuns or *beatas*, women blessed by God, were not suspected of practicing magic because they were under the protection of the Catholic Church.<sup>65</sup> But not all unmarried women wanted to become nuns. The risks associated with being single led many women who practiced magic to try to attract and retain male clients who could act as benefactors.<sup>66</sup> An unmarried woman who practiced magic would have the protection of her benefactor if the Inquisition came to their town; the benefactor would supply the woman with money or shelter. Women did not wish to be cast out of their communities and ostracized because they practiced magic.

To attract and keep a man, a woman would use love spells. One of these spells was “Si fulano ha de venir salga en camino”, which translates to “If (man’s name) is coming let him be on his way”.<sup>67</sup> Spells were often recited over fortune-telling cards or beans that were tossed onto a table or floor during an incantation.<sup>68</sup> Love spells were a well-known aspect of magic. In the southern city of Cordova, witchcraft cases were usually about love spells.<sup>69</sup> Those practicing this art were almost always women between the ages of 25 and 35.<sup>70</sup> They were more likely to receive a minimal sentence for love magic because it did not cause physical harm to anyone and was considered petty magic, since it was not associated with the devil. Oftentimes men would confess to being involved with magic to the Inquisition because they feared that they had fallen victim to a love spell.<sup>71</sup> The objective of the men who brought themselves before the Inquisition was to have the woman who had

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<sup>64</sup> María Helena Sánchez Ortega, ‘Sorcery and Eroticism in Love Magic’ in *Cultural Encounters*, ed. by Mary Elizabeth Perry and Anne J. Cruz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) p. 61.

<sup>65</sup> Ortega, ‘Sorcery and Eroticism’, p. 61.

<sup>66</sup> Ortega, ‘Sorcery and Eroticism’, p. 61.

<sup>67</sup> Ortega, ‘Sorcery and Eroticism’, p. 63.

<sup>68</sup> Ortega, ‘Sorcery and Eroticism’, p. 63.

<sup>69</sup> Pérez, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 83.

<sup>70</sup> Pérez, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 83.

<sup>71</sup> Ortega, ‘Sorcery and Eroticism’, p. 79.

cast the spell sentenced and imprisoned, so that the spell might be broken.<sup>72</sup> Married women also performed love spells or sought out individuals who practiced magic to give them a love spell. These women often wanted to keep the interest of their husband or “recover husbands’ distracted by other women”.<sup>73</sup> The Catholic Church made sure to prosecute the men and women involved in these acts of magic.<sup>74</sup> The Church thought this type of magic did involve demons and evil spirits, which they did not want to condone.<sup>75</sup> In contrast, the Spanish Inquisitors did not believe this magic was done with the help of the devil. The Spanish Inquisition chose to prosecute these cases, but on a much smaller scale than what was done in other European countries. The focus of the Spanish Inquisition was not killing witches; the monarchy had given the Inquisitors a much larger job. The most important task was to find Muslims, Protestants and Jews to kill or convert to Catholicism. The Spanish Inquisitors also understood the importance magic in these communities; it was part of their culture. The Inquisitors did not want to ruin old traditions in the Spanish communities they visited. Since many Inquisitors did not believe in witchcraft, they did not think individuals needed to be prosecuted for doing love spells. These types of spells were a concern to the Church, but the Inquisitors placed them in the category of petty magic, which was a small offense. Cases like this comprised only “3.5 percent of inquisitorial activity” from 1560-1610.<sup>76</sup> The typical punishment was not severe and in “the most extreme cases, prisoners usually received penalties limited to whipping and exile”.<sup>77</sup> Even if the accused escaped punishment, their communities could still view them with suspicion.

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<sup>72</sup> Ortega, ‘Sorcery and Eroticism’, p. 79.

<sup>73</sup> Ortega, ‘Sorcery and Eroticism’, p. 83.

<sup>74</sup> Ortega, ‘Sorcery and Eroticism’, p. 59.

<sup>75</sup> Ortega, ‘Sorcery and Eroticism’, p. 59.

<sup>76</sup> Rawlings, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 129.

<sup>77</sup> Ortega, ‘Sorcery and Eroticism’, p. 59.

Witch-hunts often diminished the reputation of the people accused of practicing magic. An accusation of witchcraft would ostracize the accused from their family and community. It could also cause psychological strain when the accused was subjected to questioning for hours on end. A serious accusation of witchcraft could “destroy a woman’s reputation, banish her, or kill her”.<sup>78</sup> The death or imprisonment of an accused woman could also lead to her property being seized.<sup>79</sup> One individual, a group of friends or a family could be accused and quickly wiped out because of the accusation of practicing witchcraft.<sup>80</sup> Without a livelihood or a home, women would usually have to get married or leave their communities. To avoid this fate, some women would confess to practicing magic instead of waiting to be accused of witchcraft.<sup>81</sup> The tribunal of Zaragoza published an edict in 1522 that gave witches in “Ribagorza and Jaca a period of six months in which to confess their sins”.<sup>82</sup> Twenty-two people did confess and were given a lighter sentence because of it.<sup>83</sup> An unusual confession from Anastasia Soriana, the wife of a peasant is part of the Inquisitorial records in two different Spanish cities. In 1584, Soriana went to the Murcia tribunal to proclaim that she had “long maintained carnal relations with a demon”.<sup>84</sup> The tribunal dismissed her case because they believed she was delusional.<sup>85</sup> In 1596, she went to the Toledo tribunal to confess again and gave the same story she had told twelve years earlier.<sup>86</sup> She was dismissed by the Inquisition for a second time, an unusual action at a

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<sup>78</sup> Barstow, *Witchcraze*, p. 31.

<sup>79</sup> Barstow, *Witchcraze*, p. 31.

<sup>80</sup> Barstow, *Witchcraze*, p. 31.

<sup>81</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 220.

<sup>82</sup> Francisco Bethencourt and Birrell Jean, *The Inquisition: A Global History, 1478-1834* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge UP, 2009) p. 184.

<sup>83</sup> Bethencourt and Birrell, *The Inquisition*, p. 184.

<sup>84</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 220.

<sup>85</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 221.

<sup>86</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 221.

time when killing witches was popular. This woman may have had mental problems or might have experienced abuse from her husband or family, who perhaps was the demon she described in her testimony. In her mind, an arrest by the Inquisition may have been the only way to escape. Regardless of her mental state or her reasons for confessing, the fact that the Inquisitors did not arrest Soriana on either occasion shows how much emphasis they placed on fair trials with ample evidence. The Inquisitors were learned men; they could probably tell when a person was affected by a mental disability most of the time and would take that fact into account when reaching a decision. The laws created by the Spanish Inquisition helped determine the guilt or innocence of potential witches.

### **Spanish Laws**

When Isabella I and Ferdinand II first came to power, local laws explaining how to handle cases of witchcraft already existed in Castile and Aragon. In Castile, these laws dated back to 1370 and 1387.<sup>87</sup> During the late 1300s, sorcery was declared a crime and “laymen would be punished by the State and clergy by the Church”.<sup>88</sup> After the Inquisition was established, cases of witchcraft still remained in the hands of the secular councils. This law was upheld in 1500 when the secular courts tried a witch in Castile and the Inquisition was not allowed to interfere with the proceedings.<sup>89</sup> If Inquisitors were in Castile when they began to question someone who they believed was a heretic, the Inquisitors would have to

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<sup>87</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 208.

<sup>88</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 208.

<sup>89</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 208.

stop their investigation and hand the accused over to the secular courts.<sup>90</sup> In Aragon, similar laws existed when Ferdinand II first became king. The secular courts had the authority to interrogate and sentence witches without the involvement of other government groups. Once the Spanish Inquisition was formed, the Inquisitors began to look for ways to improve the laws that were in place for witch trials. By 1512, secular officials in Aragon were upset with the Spanish Inquisition. The secular courts wanted more control so they would not have to follow the policies of the Inquisition for heresy cases. The secular tribunals in Aragon requested Inquisition reform measures from Ferdinand II.<sup>91</sup> Ferdinand II signed the reform measures, one of the measures being that the tribunal could not “exercise jurisdiction” over witchcraft unless the case involved heresy.<sup>92</sup> This meant that if the person accused of practicing magic was doing petty magic like love spells, then the Inquisition could prosecute the individual.

Despite the new law about petty magic, the secular courts still failed to defer to the Inquisition for those cases. They did not want the Inquisition to be involved with the decision making process, most likely because the secular courts felt their authority was being threatened. Aragon secular courts had the ability “to apply an emergency procedure, *juicio sumarísimo*, against which there could be no appeal” during the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>93</sup> *Juicio sumarísimo* allowed secular courts to act without the approval of the Inquisition, meaning they could torture and sentence individuals accused of witchcraft to death without consulting the Inquisition. The Inquisitors did not like this rule, but

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<sup>90</sup> Joseph Marie Maistre, *Letters on the Spanish Inquisition. A Facsim.* (Delmar: Facsimiles & Reprints, 1977), p. 38.

<sup>91</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 53.

<sup>92</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 53.

<sup>93</sup> Pérez, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 80.

oftentimes when they attempted to take action to reverse a sentence it would already be too late and the accused would be dead.<sup>94</sup> It is likely that the Inquisitors did not inform the monarchs of their displeasure because they knew that the king and queen wanted to have the support of their people. Since the monarchs lived in Aragon and Castile, they probably did not wish to upset the locals who could more readily rebel against their rule than the people in regions located farther away from their castle. Chances are the work done by the Spanish Inquisitors would have been important to the monarchy, but not as important as keeping their power.

The Inquisitors were displeased with the lack of evidence presented at secular court trials and how quickly the secular tribunals reached decisions.<sup>95</sup> In an attempt to rein in the groups who were intent on killing witches, the Suprema published a document on 27 August 1551 stating that all testimony from cases of witchcraft must be sent to the Suprema for review before a final ruling was made.<sup>96</sup> It appears that the secular courts often ignored this rule because they did not wish to be controlled by the Inquisition. In the minds of the secular officials, witches were guilty of heresy and should be questioned or tortured. The Spanish secular courts had been handling witchcraft trials for over fifty years; they would have believed their methods were reasonable and justified. After all, they used the exact same methods utilized by secular courts in other European countries.

At times, the secular councils in Castile and Aragon ignored the laws of the Inquisition. Fortunately, the Inquisition was able to enforce the laws about heresy cases outside of those two regions with greater success. Inquisitors spent time in the northern

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<sup>94</sup> Pérez, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 83.

<sup>95</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 221.

<sup>96</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 221.

regions, where the secular courts would lead witch-hunts. Numerous witch-hunts happened intermittently in Navarre, beginning in the late 1400s and ending in the early 1600s. A few of the first policies on witchcraft were developed as a result of the early Navarre witch trials. Inquisitors had “ordered the execution of two or three women between 1495 and 1500” in Navarre on the charge of sorcery.<sup>97</sup> This trial was the first time the Inquisition had heard details about a Sabbat, a gathering of witches.<sup>98</sup> The Inquisition learned that witches worshipped the devil at a Sabbat and performed rituals. This information caused the Suprema to wonder about the legitimacy of the confessions they had obtained. A special witchcraft commission that included the Cardinal-Inquisitor from Rome was created to find a solution for stopping the witch-hunts in Navarre.<sup>99</sup> The Inquisitors wanted the senseless killings to end, but they also wanted to debate the question of whether or not witches existed. The council concluded that more than likely witches were not real, but if they did exist then they certainly attended the Sabbat.<sup>100</sup> The council urged Inquisitors to question witnesses carefully and to treat “first time offenders mildly”.<sup>101</sup> These statements became part of the official Inquisition policy on witchcraft. Despite the new policies, the Navarre secular courts continued to kill witches.

After the conclusion of a Navarre witch-hunt in 1526, the Suprema decided to take a closer look at the actions of the Navarre secular court that had presided over the trials. The poor interrogation tactics and the lack of evidence presented at the secular court caused the Suprema to meet in Granada to discuss witchcraft. This meeting helped the Suprema

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<sup>97</sup> Decker, *Witchcraft and the Papacy*, p. 81.

<sup>98</sup> Decker, *Witchcraft and the Papacy*, p. 81.

<sup>99</sup> Decker, *Witchcraft and the Papacy*, p. 82.

<sup>100</sup> Decker, *Witchcraft and the Papacy*, p. 82.

<sup>101</sup> Decker, *Witchcraft and the Papacy*, p. 83.



determine new laws for cases of heresy.<sup>102</sup> The Inquisitor General at the time, Alonso Manrique de Lara, created a committee of ten Inquisitors “to decide whether witches really did go to the Sabbat”.<sup>103</sup>

During that time, the Inquisitor General received letters from Inquisitor Avellaneda, who was attempting to find witches in Navarre and learn about their practices at the time of the meeting in Granada. Inquisitor Avellaneda reported that he had found many witches during his six months in the mountains.<sup>104</sup> Avellaneda had come to believe “witchcraft was the worst evil of the time”.<sup>105</sup> Avellaneda stated in his letters that he had allowed one of his imprisoned witches to “anoint herself with the magic unguent which they [witches] used” and proceeded to call to a “demon who came and deposited her safely on the ground” without injuring her, even though she had flown out of a high window.<sup>106</sup> The Inquisitor also discovered three Sabbat meeting spots and was able to capture some of the witches who gathered there, which led to their execution.<sup>107</sup> By the end of his letter, Inquisitor Avellaneda stated that to discern if a witch is living in a particular community, one must “observe whether the grain is withered while in bloom, or the acorns fail in the mountains, or there are children smothered” in their beds.<sup>108</sup>

After discussing the letters from Avellaneda and other information related to the Sabbat, six of the ten Inquisitors voted that they did believe in the Sabbat, while the remaining four had the opinion that the Sabbat was a figment of the imagination.<sup>109</sup> This

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<sup>102</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 210.

<sup>103</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 211.

<sup>104</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 214.

<sup>105</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 214.

<sup>106</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 214.

<sup>107</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 214.

<sup>108</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 215.

<sup>109</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 211.

was only one of the important decisions made by the committee whilst in Granada. The Inquisitors also determined that “the homicides to which witches frequently confessed might well be illusory” and so the Inquisition should be in charge of trying those types of murder cases.<sup>110</sup> That way, the individual who claimed they had killed someone could be thoroughly questioned and the facts could be checked before a decision was made. If there was actual proof of a homicide, then a secular court was allowed to question and condemn the witch.<sup>111</sup> Another rule developed at the meeting in Granada was “whether the witches may be sentenced to the greatest ordinary penalty through their own confessions, without other proof or support”.<sup>112</sup> The Bishop of Granada, one of the ten Inquisitors, said the following about this policy:

“The penalty should rest of their confessions so they can be punished with the ordinary penalty, though a confession made under torture is not valid [without later ratification]. Just as in the crime of heresy, collaborators and the disqualified have to be received as witnesses where *maleficia* [malevolent magical acts] are concerned. Yet the witches’ confessions are insufficient to prove the *maleficia* they are they committed, and it is necessary that the injury they committed is clear, either through evidence of the deed or through other supporting evidence and violent presumptions”.<sup>113</sup>

These laws prove the Suprema believed in fair trials and evidence. The Inquisitors did not want to be responsible for the deaths of innocent Spanish men and women. The Inquisitors “did not deny the possibility of magic, but they set forth such high standards of proof” that they were able to keep many people from being questioned and tortured by the secular councils.<sup>114</sup> After the Suprema met in Granada, they realized the new laws needed

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<sup>110</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 211.

<sup>111</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 211.

<sup>112</sup> Bishop of Granada, ‘Deliberations on the Reality and Heresy of Witchcraft, 1526’, in *The Spanish Inquisition, 1478-1614: An Anthology of Sources*, ed. by Lu Ann Homza (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2006) p. 159.

<sup>113</sup> Bishop of Granada, ‘Reality and Heresy of Witchcraft’, p. 159.

<sup>114</sup> Decker, *Witchcraft and the Papacy*, p. 84.

to be shared with all of the Spanish regions. To spread the message, the Suprema sent Inquisitors to multiple Spanish towns throughout the regions.

Inquisitors were sent to publish edicts denouncing witchcraft and to show the locals why their fear of witches was irrational.<sup>115</sup> The secular court in Barcelona tried to push back against the methods employed by the Inquisition just like the secular tribunals in Navarre.<sup>116</sup> Barcelona secular courts complied for the first few years, but after 1530 the Barcelona tribunal often failed to defer to the Suprema on cases of heresy.<sup>117</sup> The Inquisition ignored this for a time, probably due to the limited number of Inquisitors and their unwillingness to force the secular court into listening to them. By 1566, Inquisitor General Fernando de Valdés y Salas was unwilling to let the secular tribunal in Barcelona ignore the authority of the Suprema any longer. He sent Inquisitors to check the Barcelona tribunal records for signs of an abuse of power.<sup>118</sup> Evidence of misconduct was discovered, which greatly upset the Inquisitor General. Valdés dismissed the Inquisitor who had been working with the secular courts and who had “sentenced six witches to death without proof”.<sup>119</sup> Valdés believed anyone could be made to confess to witchcraft if they were subjected to the right type of pressure; he knew the Barcelona trials had been poorly managed.<sup>120</sup> From that time onward, the Suprema paid greater attention to the actions of secular tribunals, attempting to keep them from senselessly killing innocent people.<sup>121</sup>

The policies developed at Granada in 1526 helped to solidify the position of the Inquisition on witchcraft, but some of the secular courts still ignored the laws. The

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<sup>115</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 211.

<sup>116</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 218.

<sup>117</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 139.

<sup>118</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 139.

<sup>119</sup> Pérez, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 82.

<sup>120</sup> Pérez, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 82.

<sup>121</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 139.

Suprema chose to revisit the subject of witchcraft in 1614 to further clarify the laws on witchcraft. After considerable discussion, the Suprema decided to create detailed instructions on how to handle cases of witchcraft. The new rules were published on 29 August 1614 and “were to remain the principal guide to the future policy of the Inquisition” for cases of witchcraft.<sup>122</sup> The thirty-two articles showed the skepticism the Spanish Inquisitors had about witchcraft. The articles advised that “caution and leniency” should be used in all investigations of witchcraft and that no stigma should be attached to those accused of witchcraft or their descendants.<sup>123</sup> This excerpt is part of the ninth article from the 1614 instructions:

“Whenever a person comes to make a confession of witchcraft or to denounce others, his entire statement is to be written down in the same words and style that he himself uses and with all the contradictions he may make. Afterwards he is to be expressly questioned regarding his motives for making the confession and whether he has been exposed to violence or coercion in this connection. If he testifies against others, attempts must be made to substantiate what he says and to discover whether there is enmity between him and those he accuses of witchcraft”.<sup>124</sup>

The Inquisition hoped these rules would be followed so no one would be tortured or killed because of an accusation of witchcraft. These instructions helped to end the witch mania in the Basque region during the early 1600s, saving many individuals from accusations of witchcraft.

Aside from laws about how to manage witchcraft trials, the Spanish Inquisition also developed policies that protected the accused. Individuals who were first accused and later acquitted of witchcraft charges did not have their property seized by the Inquisition or the Spanish crown.<sup>125</sup> A strange practice compared to what was happening throughout the rest

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<sup>122</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 213.

<sup>123</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 214.

<sup>124</sup> Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate*, p. 372.

<sup>125</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 236.

of Europe, but a wonderful thing for people accused of practicing magic. In areas outside of the Spanish regions, oftentimes a person would accuse another of a crime so that they could see their enemy suffer. Many countries had laws allowing the belongings of criminals to become the property of the town or country to cover the costs of the trial. The Inquisition made sure that the accused were not taken advantage of simply because they had been suspected of witchcraft.<sup>126</sup> The Spanish Inquisition wanted the Spanish people to see them as a fair and just court, not one that frightened people into confessing. There is little evidence to suggest that the secular courts tried to fight this rule; they seemed to have only disobeyed the Inquisition on matters of sentencing and the torture of the accused. It is plausible that once someone was sentenced and killed by the secular courts for witchcraft, then the court might have seized the possessions of the deceased, particularly if the witch had lived alone.

Another law created by the Suprema was developed to help ease the workload of the Inquisitors. Beginning in the 1550s, the Suprema decided the Spanish Inquisition could be more effective and reach more communities if they had additional help. The Inquisition had been relatively successful thus far, however the Suprema realized that if they wanted to reach all of the Spanish regions, the Inquisitors could not continue to ride through the districts in a circuit to hear cases and dole out punishments.<sup>127</sup> The Suprema understood that by constantly traveling from one district to the next, it would be hard to ensure that the Inquisitor who worked on a case had gathered enough evidence to make a sound decision. To combat this problem the Inquisitor General at the time, Fernando de Valdés,

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<sup>126</sup> William Monter, *Frontiers of Heresy: The Spanish Inquisition from the Basque Lands to Sicily*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 36.

<sup>127</sup> Decker, *Witchcraft and the Papacy*, p. 81.

decided to restructure the “administration and policy goals”.<sup>128</sup> Valdés and a future Inquisitor General, Gaspar de Quiroga, worked hard during their separate tenures as the head Inquisitor to expand the reach of the Spanish Inquisition into new regions and hear more cases. The Catholic Church supported this decision because they wanted to “triumph over pagan antiquity” and be the dominant religion in Europe.<sup>129</sup>

Pope Paul IV strongly believed in this idea and chose to “deal with witchcraft personally” during his time as pope.<sup>130</sup> From 1555 to 1559, Pope Paul IV worked hard to support Spanish Inquisitors in their work to find heretics.<sup>131</sup> He decreed “anyone who denied the Trinity and thus the divinity of Jesus were to be punished with death, unless they confessed their sins freely within a period of three months”.<sup>132</sup> This statement dramatically changed the responsibilities of the Inquisition.<sup>133</sup> As the Inquisitor General, Fernando de Valdés needed to incorporate the teachings of the Church into his plan to reorganize the Spanish Inquisition. Valdés would have known that the support of the Pope meant a great deal to the Spanish monarchs and lords. The support from Rome gave Valdés the support of the Spanish people, who did not protest as the Spanish Inquisition began to hear more cases related to heresy than ever before.<sup>134</sup> To the common people, the authority of the secular courts and the Spanish Inquisition may have seemed remarkably similar for cases of witchcraft. A lack of understanding about the distinction between the two groups and the laws about how to handle cases of heresy would mean members of the communities affected by witch-hunts would not have necessarily known the secular courts

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<sup>128</sup> Nalle, ‘Inquisitors, Priests, and the People’, p. 558.

<sup>129</sup> Bailey, ‘The Age of Magicians’, p. 3.

<sup>130</sup> Decker, *Witchcraft and the Papacy*, p. 87.

<sup>131</sup> Decker, *Witchcraft and the Papacy*, p. 87.

<sup>132</sup> Decker, *Witchcraft and the Papacy*, p. 87.

<sup>133</sup> Decker, *Witchcraft and the Papacy*, p. 87.

<sup>134</sup> Nalle, ‘Inquisitors, Priests, and the People’, p. 558.

were being overzealous. Without an understanding of the laws, the Spanish people would have not known to protest against the killing or torturing of witches. A greater number of witch trials occurred throughout the Spanish regions after 1560, which meant the Inquisition needed more men to help manage the trials.

To accomplish this, the Suprema decided to create “networks of non-salaried officials who would extend the Inquisition’s presence into the countryside on a permanent basis”.<sup>135</sup> These officials, known as *comisarios*, were in charge of finding heretics, collecting testimonies and questioning the accused.<sup>136</sup> Like the Inquisitors, *comisarios* were usually priests. The *comisarios* used the same interrogation techniques as the Spanish Inquisitors, however they were not allowed to sentence the accused. Once they had compiled all of the evidence, the *comisario* would send for the Inquisitor, who would listen to the evidence and then make a decision. By adding *comisarios*, the Inquisition was able to hear more cases than ever before.<sup>137</sup> *Comisarios* may be part of the reason why witch trials in the Spanish regions were more common after the 1560s. Since cases against Jews and Muslims were deemed more important, the few Inquisitors who existed between 1478 and 1560 would have focused on those cases, ignoring cases of witchcraft. After the *comisarios* began to help with the workload, the Inquisitors were free to interrogate greater numbers of witches.

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<sup>135</sup> Nalle, ‘Inquisitors, Priests, and the People’, p. 559.

<sup>136</sup> Nalle, ‘Inquisitors, Priests, and the People’, p. 559.

<sup>137</sup> Nalle, ‘Inquisitors, Priests, and the People’, p. 559.

## **Hunting and Interrogating Witches: Some Case Studies**

Before the Inquisition or the secular courts could interrogate a witch, they needed to find one. Witch-hunts were most common in the northern Spanish regions throughout the first half of the Spanish Inquisition. Many Spanish Inquisition scholars cite the close proximity to France, a country that was caught up in the witch mania, as one of the main reasons why the northern regions were affected by witch mania more often in comparison to the southern regions. Travelers from France would bring tales of magic to the northern Spanish regions and infect the Spanish communities with the desire to hunt and kill witches. The southern Spanish regions may have experienced fewer witch-hunts because those areas were surrounded by water, not other countries. The semi-isolated position of the Spanish regions on the edge of Europe means the idea to hunt and kill people who practiced magic probably would have taken more time to reach the Spanish. The northern secular courts were quicker to accuse individuals of witchcraft because they were exposed to the stories about witches from European travelers. People outside of the Spanish regions truly believed in the power of magic and thought that it could be used to harm them. The stories and feelings of panic from visitors could have easily scared the communities in the northern regions into thinking that magic would be used to hurt them. In contrast, the Suprema were located in Madrid, a city in the center of the Spanish regions. Most likely, the people of Madrid would not have heard stories of witchcraft from travelers very often, meaning they would not be frightened by magic to the same degree as the Spanish living in the north.



Despite their semi-isolated location, the Spanish still heard of the witch-hunts occurring throughout Europe. Members of the secular courts and the Inquisition learned how to interrogate witches from literature published before the start of the Spanish Inquisition. One of the most famous documents instructing witch hunters on the proper practices for finding, questioning and killing witches was the *Malleus Maleficarum*, The Witches' Hammer.<sup>138</sup> Heinrich Kramer was a German Dominican friar who wrote the manual in 1487 to aid other witch hunters in identifying and questioning witches.<sup>139</sup> In the text, Kramer explains the number of individuals that need to be present during a witch trial as well as the importance of the accused taking an oath.

“Here it must always be noted that in such an examination at least five persons must be present, namely, the presiding Judge, the witness of informer, the respondent or accused, who appears afterwards, and the third is the Notary or scribe: where there is no Notary the scribe shall co-opt another honest man, and these two, as has been said, shall perform the duties of the Notary; and this is provided for by Apostolic authority, as was shown above, that in this kind of action two honest men should perform as it were the duty of witnesses of the depositions. Also it must be noted that when a witness is called he must also be sworn, that is, he must take the oath in the manner we have shown; otherwise he would falsely be described as called and sworn”.<sup>140</sup>

The popularity of the manual spread throughout Europe, eventually making its way to the Spanish secular courts. After this manual was published, secular courts began to judge a greater number of witchcraft cases without the help of the Inquisition because it gave local judges a better idea of what signs to look for to determine if an individual was a witch.<sup>141</sup>

Officially, the Spanish Inquisition was in charge of presiding over witch trials throughout the Spanish regions. A secular court could begin the initial interrogation to help determine if the accused showed signs of witchcraft, but they were not legally allowed to

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<sup>138</sup> Decker, *Witchcraft and the Papacy*, p. 50.

<sup>139</sup> Decker, *Witchcraft and the Papacy*, p. 50.

<sup>140</sup> Heinrich Kramer, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, (New York: Dover Occult, 1971), p. 452.

<sup>141</sup> Bailey, 'The Age of Magicians', p. 21.

conduct the entire investigation. However, this does not mean the secular courts were kinder to witches than the Inquisitors. In fact, secular courts had the right to “torture prisoners until they accuse others” of practicing magic.<sup>142</sup> Methods of torture included requiring “the accused to grasp hot irons or be submerged in water”, which was supposed to determine guilt or innocence.<sup>143</sup> The secular courts “had an extremely poor reputation” in regards to properly handling cases of magic.<sup>144</sup> Oftentimes, Inquisitors had to stop the secular judges from torturing the accused to death or from arresting large numbers of people. The reputation of the secular courts was well known throughout the Spanish regions, causing those accused of witchcraft to make “outrageous blasphemies” or to claim “they were Protestants, in order to get themselves transferred from secular prisons to the Inquisition”.<sup>145</sup>

However, the secular courts in the northern Spanish towns did not always start the witch-hunts. In 1525, at least forty individuals suspected of practicing magic in a northern town in Navarre were arrested and killed by a traveling jurist, a man who was not associated with the Spanish Inquisition or the secular court in Navarre.<sup>146</sup> Soon after the jurist departed, a priest began to suspect locals were practicing magic. The priest, Martin de Castanega, led a small witch-hunt in 1526.<sup>147</sup> Martin de Castanega specifically targeted women, who he claimed were more likely to be witches because “they are more talkative, and could not keep secrets, want to know about secret matters, are more angry and

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<sup>142</sup> Barstow, *Witchcraze*, p. 93.

<sup>143</sup> Bailey, ‘The Age of Magicians’, p. 11.

<sup>144</sup> Monter, *Frontiers*, p. 74.

<sup>145</sup> Monter, *Frontiers*, p. 74.

<sup>146</sup> Decker, *Witchcraft and the Papacy*, p. 82.

<sup>147</sup> Barstow, *Witchcraze*, p. 93.

vengeful and being powerless, have no way other than witchcraft to get what they want".<sup>148</sup> Targeting women was not uncommon; the priest likely targeted women in the community because he had heard the traveling jurist make those remarks or he was upset with certain women in the community. *Malleus Maleficarum* encouraged men to distrust women and suspect them of practicing magic, so the priest could have based his thoughts about women off this text. The secular authorities made many arrests of supposed witches under the direction of Martin de Castanega. This story shows how outsiders would bring witch mania into small Spanish communities and frighten the people into conducting a witch-hunt. The secular court in Navarre ended up helping Martin de Castanega attack witches, even though they originally did not believe witches existed in their community. It is probable that fear and panic of the unknown were two of the main causes of witch trials in many Spanish communities.

Another massive witch-hunt in the northern region of Basque began in 1609. This witch-hunt started when Pierre de Lancre, a French judge, conducted a large-scale witch-hunt in the French province of Labourd, an area located next to the border of the Spanish Basque region. Lancre created witch mania in the French Pyrenees Mountain communities, a mania that spread to the Basque region. It is interesting that this series of witch trials also began as a result of foreign influence. If there had been less contact between the Spanish and the French, perhaps fewer witch-hunts would have transpired in the Spanish regions. From 1609 until 1614, the secular courts accused 5000 people of practicing magic in the Basque region.<sup>149</sup> The secular courts were alarmed by the witch trials in France, leading the secular Basque officials to seek out potential witches. The Suprema heard reports of the

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<sup>148</sup> Barstow, *Witchcraze*, p. 93.

<sup>149</sup> Barstow, *Witchcraze*, p. 90.

Basque witch-hunts and were concerned about the severity of the charges. The Inquisitor General at the time, Bernardo de Sandoval y Rojas, decided to send an Inquisitor to the Basque region to hear and review the cases before sentences were given.<sup>150</sup> Sandoval y Rojas sent Alonso de Salazar Frías, instructing him to use good judgment in the Basque courts.

Once Inquisitor Alonso de Salazar Frías arrived in the northern Basque region in June 1609, he realized the witch-hunts would not be easily quelled. He received reports from the two Inquisitors already living in Logroño, a city near the Basque region, that accusations of witchcraft were primarily occurring in two towns. The men and women accused of witchcraft came almost exclusively from two villages in the Pyrenees Mountains, Zugarramurdi and Urdax.<sup>151</sup> The villages were small, with only about 150 people living in each one.<sup>152</sup> About a quarter of the adult population from these two villages were accused of being witches by the secular courts.<sup>153</sup> Many of the twenty-five people from the villages were accused of sucking the blood of their enemies' children, which had resulted in the death of one of the children.<sup>154</sup> Miguel de Goiburu, a 66-year-old shepherd confessed to this crime.<sup>155</sup> Goiburu stated that he did practice vampirism and had sucked the blood of his young niece thirty years earlier.<sup>156</sup> There was a large age range for the adults who confessed to practicing witchcraft in the two villages; the witches were men and women.

Aside from murdering people who upset them, the accused were also held responsible for crop failures in their towns. When witches infected wheat there would be

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<sup>150</sup> Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate*, p. 46.

<sup>151</sup> Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate*, p. 27.

<sup>152</sup> Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate*, p. 27.

<sup>153</sup> Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate*, p. 27.

<sup>154</sup> Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate*, p. 28.

<sup>155</sup> Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate*, p. 28.

<sup>156</sup> Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate*, p. 28.

“blackish-yellow powder, sticky and evil-smelling” inside of the wheat ear.<sup>157</sup> That blackish, sticky powder was actually the blight, not a curse. Of course, growing crops in the mountains is difficult, since it is harder for plants to grow in the harsh soil and the weather can be more temperamental. But the people of Zugarramurdi and Urdax did not believe this was the reason for the poor harvests, just as they tended to blame the death of a child on a witch instead of on disease or circumstance. Inquisitor Salazar Frías had the difficult task of convincing the locals that witches did not cause crop failure while he was attempting to render judgment for each person accused of practicing magic. He presented evidence to the locals to help convince them witches did not exist.

The head council of the Inquisition, the Suprema, established “rules for the evaluation of evidence” in the early years of the Spanish Inquisition.<sup>158</sup> These rules were created to ensure consistency between Inquisitors, regardless of the interrogation methods used by the secular court where a witch trial was happening. If the Inquisition did not think the evidence presented at the trial was legitimate, then those accused of witchcraft were released without being harmed.<sup>159</sup> This practice was considered abnormal at the time. The Spanish Inquisitors were some of the few government officials throughout Europe who emphasized caution when interrogating potential witches.

Another unique aspect of the Spanish Inquisition is that witnesses who testified against a witch could tell the Inquisition before or after a sentencing that their testimony had been false without fear of severe consequences.<sup>160</sup> This was unusual compared to the rest of Europe; most places would have tortured or killed a witness for changing their

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<sup>157</sup> Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate*, p. 29.

<sup>158</sup> Roth, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 200.

<sup>159</sup> Roth, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 200.

<sup>160</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 235.

statement in court. Revoking a previous statement would not necessarily change the sentence of the accused, but the Inquisition would take the new information into account when making their final decision. It seems probable that Inquisitors did not harm the people who changed their statements because they were skeptical about witchcraft themselves. Individuals who no longer believed their own testimony were not to be punished since the goal of the Inquisition was to root out heresy, not blindly kill innocents. To alter the final verdict, the Inquisitors involved in the case needed to vote unanimously to change the original decision.<sup>161</sup> After the vote, the change needed to be approved by the Suprema.<sup>162</sup> It is likely that modifications to a sentence originally decided by a secular court would have irritated the secular tribunals. A new decision by the Inquisition would have made the secular courts seem incompetent, causing the community to lose faith in their abilities. Quick interrogations may have seemed necessary to the secular courts. It would allow them to sentence and execute a person before the Inquisition arrived so they could to maintain their reputation.

In order to determine if someone accused of practicing magic was indeed a witch, Inquisitors would question him or her for hours at a time. Inquisitors would often ask the same question multiple times over the course of a few days to see if and why the accused altered their response. Witnesses would be found and questioned; the claims made by each person would be checked multiple times before a decision was made. One of the most extreme examples of questioning witnesses and the accused to find the truth happened in 1611 after a large *auto de fé* in Navarre. During the year 1610, the secular courts killed a number of people accused of witchcraft before the Spanish Inquisitors could question

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<sup>161</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 236.

<sup>162</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 236.

them. The rash actions of the secular courts upset the Suprema, causing them to send Inquisitor Alonso de Salazar Frías to visit the districts around Navarre and offer the people an edict of grace as a way for them to “repudiate their errors”.<sup>163</sup> The mission took him almost a year; he began in May 1611 and did not present his report until March 1612.<sup>164</sup> Salazar Frías told the Suprema he had “reconciled 1802 persons: of these 1384 were children between the ages of nine and twelve in the case of girls, and between nine and fourteen in the case of boys; of the others, ‘several were old and even senile, over the age of seventy and eighty’”.<sup>165</sup> The end of the report gave his own conclusions, which stated that Salazar Frías had not found any evidence to suggest that witchcraft had actually taken place in the region.<sup>166</sup> Salazar Frías wrote

“I have not found the slightest evidence from which to infer that a single act of witchcraft has really occurred. Indeed, my previous suspicions have been strengthened by new evidence from the visitation: that the evidence of the accused alone, without external proof, is insufficient to justify arrest, and that three-quarters and more have accused themselves and their accomplices falsely”.<sup>167</sup>

He also determined that at least seventy five percent of the people who had acted as accusers or witnesses had been lying, and he attributed some of the false testimony to “the diseased state of the public mind”.<sup>168</sup> Witch mania had taken hold in Basque, leading people to believe in the existence of magic even though they had not believed in witches beforehand. Salazar also believed some of the accused or the accusers were afflicted with mental illnesses, causing them to believe in witchcraft. The rest were simply caught up in the panic and began to think witches were real because everyone else seemed to think so. It

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<sup>163</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 212.

<sup>164</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 212.

<sup>165</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 212.

<sup>166</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 213.

<sup>167</sup> Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate*, p. 304-305.

<sup>168</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 213.

might have been scary for villagers to encounter witches, but also exciting. Village life was most likely not very enthralling; any distraction would have been a welcome one as long as you were not the individual being persecuted. Scholar Pedro de Valencia was also commissioned by the Suprema to report on witchcraft in Navarre; he agreed with Salazar stating, “there was a strong element of mental sickness in the Navarre events”.<sup>169</sup> Both men questioned the people who were still alive after the *auto de fé* before they reached any conclusions about their guilt or innocence, something the secular courts had failed to do. Perhaps it was easier for Inquisitor Alonso de Salazar Frías and scholar Pedro de Valencia to think about the Navarre witch trials objectively because they had not been living in the area when the witch-hunt began. If they had been, the men might also have become swept up in the witch mania.

One of the most effective interrogation tactics utilized by the Inquisition was the practice of not informing the accused of their crime until the trial was well underway.<sup>170</sup> The main purpose of a trial was to “arouse a heretic’s sense of guilt, which would provide the motivation for him to amend his erring ways” and to confess to the crime.<sup>171</sup> Prisoners were told over and over to confess and repent, which would ideally occur during one of the three preliminary hearings.<sup>172</sup> If the accused did not confess during the hearings, they had to wait for a period of time before going to trial again. This waiting period could often take months.<sup>173</sup> This tactic seems to be harsh, however it is important to remember that the Spanish Inquisition was not physically torturing the accused. The reason for questioning

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<sup>169</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 213.

<sup>170</sup> Henningsen, *The Witches’ Advocate*, p. 40.

<sup>171</sup> Henningsen, *The Witches’ Advocate*, p. 40.

<sup>172</sup> Henningsen, *The Witches’ Advocate*, p. 40.

<sup>173</sup> Henningsen, *The Witches’ Advocate*, p. 40.



people over and over was to identify any discrepancies in their statement. If a discrepancy was identified, then the Inquisitors might suspect the whole statement was false. The point of the interrogations was to discern the truth; the Inquisitors did not want to accidentally release someone who was a true heretic. While they were waiting for the trial to begin, the accused might have lived in the Inquisitorial prisons. Inquisition prisons were designed so that prisoners could only interact with their cellmates.<sup>174</sup> Houses of correction also acted like prisons, except the individuals waiting to go to trial had work permits that allowed them to leave the house to earn money for their food.<sup>175</sup> The houses of correction were used for women prisoners more often than men.<sup>176</sup> Roth does not give an explanation for this, however it is possible the Inquisitors wanted the women prisoners to be kept in the houses of correction to keep them from harm or illness. The Spanish believed in treating women well; it was important to the Spanish culture to keep women from harm because they were the ones who could have children.<sup>177</sup> The Suprema would carry out inspections of the various prisons that were located across the Spanish regions when they went to visit the Inquisition tribunals.<sup>178</sup> Though the Inquisition had prisons, the accused were often kept in secular court jails. The secular courts were usually the first group to find a witch and interrogate them, so it was easier to leave the accused in the prison they were originally housed in than move them to another jail. The local jails were often closer to the area where the accused would be tried and sentenced as well.

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<sup>174</sup> Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate*, p. 38.

<sup>175</sup> Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate*, p. 38.

<sup>176</sup> Roth, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 113.

<sup>177</sup> Barstow, *Witchcraze*, p. 93.

<sup>178</sup> Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate*, p. 39.

## Sentencing a Witch

At the start of the Spanish Inquisition, the Inquisitors followed the sentencing practices used by their medieval predecessors when condemning witches. Witches who were sentenced to die were burned at the stake during the first fifty years of the Spanish Inquisition. In Saragossa, a town located in Aragon, witches were burned to death on three different occasions in the years 1498, 1499 and 1500.<sup>179</sup> During the witch trial in 1500, at least four women were executed.<sup>180</sup> The tribunal of Calahorra in the north also burned thirty women suspected of witchcraft in 1507.<sup>181</sup> After this event, the Spanish Inquisition decided that practicing magic was a crime and declared that instances of witchcraft should be reported and dealt with on a regular basis.<sup>182</sup> The Spanish Inquisitors did sentence witches to burn, but they also spent many hours questioning the accused before making the final ruling. After the early 1500s, individuals were not usually burned if they were declared witches. Instead, Inquisitors would sentence them to whippings or the humiliation of declaring themselves a witch and asking for forgiveness in public. Out of 307 witch trials that transpired in the regions of Cuenca and Toledo during the Spanish Inquisition, no death sentences were ever given to witches by the Inquisitors.<sup>183</sup> The Santiago court in Galicia heard 140 cases of witchcraft from 1560 to 1700, yet all but two of the accused were released.<sup>184</sup> These numbers prove that the Spanish Inquisitors did not want to punish people accused of practicing magic unless it was clear they were harming others.

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<sup>179</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 210.

<sup>180</sup> Monter, *Frontiers*, p. 25.

<sup>181</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 210.

<sup>182</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 210.

<sup>183</sup> Pérez, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 82.

<sup>184</sup> Pérez, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 82.

The Suprema constantly emphasized caution to the Inquisitors when they investigated cases of magic. After the witch trials in Navarre that occurred between 1530 and 1532, the local Inquisitor investigating the matter was instructed by the Suprema to be wary of eyewitness reports claiming one person or another was a witch.<sup>185</sup> The Suprema wrote this in a letter to the local Inquisitor:

“As for your account of the witches’ falling asleep when they set out, look into this matter very carefully. It is not certain that they act in this way and their claim that they do so may be deceptive. Therefore, you should continue to investigate this according to instructions”.<sup>186</sup>

The Suprema did not want the Inquisitors living in Navarre to get caught up in the witch mania. The witch trials from 1530 to 1532 caused strife between the secular courts and the Inquisition.<sup>187</sup> The local government did not want to “acknowledge the exclusive jurisdiction of the Inquisition” as it pertained to sentencing for cases of heresy.<sup>188</sup> The secular courts were not fond of the lenient sentences the Inquisition gave to witches or how long and extensive the questioning process was.<sup>189</sup> The people wanted blood; the thorough methods of questioning used by the Inquisition were too slow in the eyes of the public.<sup>190</sup> Even though some of the Inquisitors believed the secular courts had a point about bringing swift justice down upon on those accused of witchcraft, the Suprema continued to restrain “the cruel zeal of the tribunals”.<sup>191</sup> In this instance, the Inquisition was unable to contain the witch craze occurring in Navarre. It was around this time that “the Suprema insisted upon its right to review all convictions of sorcery or witchcraft” in order to stop

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<sup>185</sup> Decker, *Witchcraft and the Papacy*, p. 83.

<sup>186</sup> Decker, *Witchcraft and the Papacy*, p. 83.

<sup>187</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 216.

<sup>188</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 216.

<sup>189</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 216.

<sup>190</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 216.

<sup>191</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 217.

the mass killings.<sup>192</sup> The monarchs Charles I and Johanna I did not show support for the Inquisition or the secular courts during this time, as they were attempting to stop revolts in Castile and focused their energy toward keeping their kingdom. The Inquisition and secular courts were essentially left to handle cases of heresy on their own, trusting that the monarchy did not disapprove of their decisions.

In 1610, an Inquisitor stationed in Navarre led a witch-hunt, sentencing a number of women to death.<sup>193</sup> This was the first time that a member of the Inquisition had initiated a witch-hunt. Prior to this, the secular courts, foreign travelers or members of the communities were the ones to initiate the trials. Since a massive witch-hunt had started in the neighboring Basque region a few months before, it is likely that the Inquisitor in Navarre had caught witch mania from the Basque witch-hunt. This witch-hunt had more traction in the Basque towns because of the presence of an “ancient pre-Christian fertility cult” located in the area.<sup>194</sup> Many of the women accused of witchcraft were members of this non-Catholic group and were persecuted because of their non-Catholic beliefs. Forty of these individuals were put on trial and sentenced in June 1610.<sup>195</sup>

Individuals who expected to be killed because they were witches were often grateful when the Inquisitors finally arrived. The accused would have already been questioned and tortured by the secular courts prior to the arrival of the Spanish Inquisition. The arrival of the Inquisitors would have probably been a relief for the accused because it was a second chance for survival. The Basque witch trials are one instance where many of the people originally accused of practicing witchcraft by a secular court were given lesser sentences

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<sup>192</sup> Edward Peters, *Inquisition*, p. 101.

<sup>193</sup> Roth, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 200.

<sup>194</sup> Roth, *The Spanish Inquisition*, p. 200.

<sup>195</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 225.

by the Inquisitors. After hearing the evidence in the Basque region, the Spanish Inquisitors decided to dismiss most of the cases, with six or seven of the accused being sentenced to burn at the stake.<sup>196</sup> These individuals were burned during an *auto de fé*, a public ritual where the final ruling was made and the punishment was carried out. This *auto de fé* transpired in Logroño, the city where the Inquisitors had heard all of the evidence. Five of the accused died in prison prior to the *auto de fé* and one woman committed suicide before she could be sentenced.<sup>197</sup> Witch trials continued in the Basque region for a time, however the Inquisition was reluctant to sentence Spanish people to death. Many of the Spanish Inquisitors did not believe in the existence of magic, which made them hesitant to sentence people suspected of witchcraft to death. Oftentimes, the pressure from the secular courts in the area and the panic from the communities were the factors that led the Inquisitors to approve executions. By 1614, the Inquisitors in Basque had heard over 5000 cases related to witchcraft.<sup>198</sup> Many of those cases were dismissed and the accused returned home without punishment because of the logical thinking of the Inquisitors involved.<sup>199</sup>

Unlike the Inquisition, the secular courts were much more willing to sentence witches to death for their crimes. This may be due to the fact that the secular courts wanted to show the Spanish Inquisition that they did not hold all of the governmental power in the Spanish regions. Many times throughout the Spanish Inquisition, the Suprema failed to stop the secular courts from executing individuals' accused of practicing witchcraft. Once witch mania took hold of a town it would quickly spread, causing "dozens of witches" to be

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<sup>196</sup> Barstow, *Witchcraze*, p. 90.

<sup>197</sup> Barstow, *Witchcraze*, p. 90.

<sup>198</sup> Barstow, *Witchcraze*, p. 90.

<sup>199</sup> Barstow, *Witchcraze*, p. 90.

“hanged in several towns” in places like Catalonia.<sup>200</sup> The severity of the punishments given to witches by the secular tribunals is most likely part of the reason why the Spanish Inquisition began to pay closer attention to the actions of those courts. For example, the secular court in Barcelona had been using “excessive severity in suppressing the witch-craze in Catalonia”.<sup>201</sup> Stories of the harsh actions of the secular courts during the Barcelona witch-hunt were reported to the Suprema in Madrid. After hearing the alarming stories, the Inquisition sent Inquisitors to monitor each decision the secular tribunal made during the Barcelona trials. If the secular courts had not prosecuted and killed witches with such zeal, then the Spanish Inquisition may not have monitored their actions as closely. The actions of the secular courts could have resulted in the stricter rules; something the courts had been trying to avoid all along. The Spanish Inquisition did not always manage to stop the secular courts from sentencing witches to death. Nevertheless, Inquisitors were far kinder to the accused than the secular courts when handling cases of witchcraft.

## **Conclusion**

The Spanish Inquisition is considered to be a black mark on the record of monarchs Isabella I of Castile and Ferdinand II of Aragon. When the monarchs came to power, the regions they controlled were politically unstable. The right of Isabella I to be queen was initially questioned by a select group of her nobles, causing them to work with the Portuguese in an attempt to overthrow her. This resistance to her rule along with uprisings in their regions resulted in regional strife during the early years of their reign. By 1478, the

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<sup>200</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 276.

<sup>201</sup> Kamen, *Inquisition and Society*, p. 139.

monarchs decided to create the Spanish Inquisition as a way to ensure Spanish Catholics were following and upholding Catholicism. The Spanish Inquisition was also tasked with helping to remove Jews and Muslims from the Spanish regions. The monarchs did not want Spaniards practicing these religions and feared the Jews might eventually gain too much political power in the kingdoms. Spanish Inquisitors, the priests who presided over countless trials, are viewed as the unfeeling and cruel men who tortured many innocent men and women. It is true that the Spanish Inquisitors were unkind to many minority groups living in the Spanish regions from 1478-1650, especially Jews and Muslims. The famous brutality of the Inquisition is evident when one examines those cases. However, the Inquisition was not senselessly killing and torturing individuals accused of witchcraft. As Monter points out in his book, “the Spanish Inquisition used torture less frequently and less severely than secular courts” because they used “scientific methods” to prove guilt or innocence.<sup>202</sup> In stark contrast to other European countries, the Spanish Inquisitors declared most individuals accused of witchcraft to be innocent after they were interrogated. Inquisitors offered suspected witches chances to confess, which often allowed them to escape with minimal punishment and gave witnesses the chance to recant their testimonies at any time.

Over time, the Spanish Inquisition developed policies to protect witches from unfair trials at the hands of their own Inquisitors. Lea argues the Spanish regions remained relatively untouched by the witch-hunts that consumed the rest of Europe “due to the wisdom and firmness of the Inquisition”.<sup>203</sup> This point is a good one; the Inquisitors continuously sought to create better rules and fairer practices for witch trials. The

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<sup>202</sup> Monter, *Frontiers*, p. 74.

<sup>203</sup> Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, p. 206.

Inquisitors would not have looked to improve laws related to heresy unless they believed witchcraft was not an appalling crime. The skepticism about the existence of magic that began during the Middle Ages and continued through the first half of the Spanish Inquisition allowed Inquisitors to question the information about witchcraft given to them by the Catholic Church and the documents left behind by the Medieval Inquisitors. The Catholic clergymen and Medieval Inquisitors were not equally cruel or lenient to people accused of witchcraft. In fact, the Catholic Church did not become interested in witchcraft until the early 1500s. During the first half of the Spanish Inquisition, the official stance of the Catholic Church and the papacy changed depending on the thoughts of the pope at the time and the other high-ranking officials. This inconsistency meant that the Catholic bishops and priests might have felt differently about witchcraft depending on their location in Europe and the time period. Regardless of the perspective of the Catholic Church at any given time, Spanish Inquisitors felt secure enough in their positions to debate about whether or not witches were real without fear of punishment from the Spanish monarchs or the Church.

The Inquisitors used facts to determine guilt or innocence. They did not allow the fear of witches that was sweeping across Europe to affect their judgment. In fact, Spanish Inquisitors tried to protect people accused of practicing magic from the insanity of the secular courts. The northern Spanish regions, like Navarre and Basque, experienced the most turmoil from witch trials. Their location in the north made those trials more tumultuous because they were located next to France, a country intent on finding and killing witches. The location of the region and what was happening with witch mania in the rest of Europe oftentimes affected where witch trials occurred. The Inquisitors did not let



the witch mania that affected the northern regions change their opinions about magic. While the secular tribunals were trying to kill witches, the Inquisitors insisted on reviewing cases of witchcraft before a final decision was made. Oftentimes, the Spanish Inquisition would decide to release the accused or give them a lighter punishment. Clear thinking and light punishments are not what one expects to hear about the Spanish Inquisition, but it was the reality if the trial was related to witchcraft.

Part of the reason this reality has been excluded from the history of the Spanish Inquisition is due to the lack of extensive research on the subject. Witch trials in other European countries such as Germany, England and France have been studied in depth, but the story of the witch trials during the Spanish Inquisition is largely ignored. Historians like Henry Charles Lea and Gustav Henningsen have delved into the topic of Spanish witchcraft with success, but other Spanish Inquisition historians have yet to recognize the importance of the Spanish witch trials. Tolerance of magic was part of the Spanish culture long before the Spanish Inquisition began. This tolerance continued in later years to a certain degree in the Spanish regions, making the witch trials during the Spanish Inquisition far less horrific in comparison to the rest of Europe. The reasons behind these differences are important to understand in order to get a clearer picture of the Spanish witch trials. The Spanish witch trials are a significant part of the history of the Spanish Inquisition. Without understanding the reasons behind the lesser sentences and smaller witch trials, it is difficult to understand the Spanish Inquisition in its entirety. The Spanish Inquisition was more than its terrible treatment of Jews and Muslims. It is was a jury that strived to be tolerant of witches, continuously improving laws to ensure proper trials occurred in the inquisitorial and

secular courts. In this instance, the goal of the Spanish Inquisition was one of fairness, not senseless killing.

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