

# DRUGS OF THE DEVIL

by Dr Bernard Barnett

*Mediaeval witchcraft was not, in the author's opinion, an empty invention of superstitious minds, but involved the practical use of potent hallucinogenic drugs. Several of the phenomena described by the witch-hunters can be interpreted as effects familiar in modern pharmacology*

A hundred years ago Lecky, the historian of rationalism, wrote of witchcraft: "Yet it is I think, difficult to examine the subject with impartiality without coming to the conclusion that the historical evidence establishing the reality of witchcraft is so vast and so varied, that nothing but our overwhelming sense of its antecedent improbability and our modern experience of the manner in which it has faded away under the influence of civilization can justify us in despising it."

Lecky, however, did not evaluate the historical evidence and explain the nucleus of fact round which so much fantasy was woven. Magic practice is still believed in by some societies; wish-fulfilment as well as anxiety-dominated thinking is a feature of everyday life. These do not generally reach the proportion—in modern Britain, at least—which was seen in those dealing with witchcraft. Yet the tendency to label many of the keenest intellects of the Middle Ages, who believed in witchcraft, as suffering from ignorance or delusions is to disregard the importance

*Plants like mandrake and others of the potato family (Solanaceae) could have provided a source of the drugs thought to have been used in witchcraft. Left a drawing of the plant from De Historia Stirpium, 1545. Right a mediaeval woodcut showing a "male" mandrake, the figure symbolizing its use in love potions*



of viewing such beliefs in the setting in which they arose.

That the evidence has come down to us largely through the hands of those who were victorious antagonists of witchcraft does not make it any easier for us to discover the truth about it. Reinforced with old lore and our more advanced knowledge of pharmacology, the evidence is, however, sufficient to dismiss the allegations that madness or perverted sexuality were the main features of the witch-cult and the persecutors of witches. Both features were indeed present but not as determinants, though cause and effect were often so closely interwoven that it is hard to say which was which.

In this article I shall argue that the witches, as well as some of the judges, seem to have depended on sense data for their beliefs, no less than modern scientists do, but the sense data were largely fictitious in that they were determined by the use of drugs and not by objective examination of the world. Since the concept of hallucinogenic drugs was not defined,

the Devil, not surprisingly, got the blame for the consequent mischief.

*What was witchcraft?*—It was a religious cult of pre-Christian origins which had two aspects, ritual witchcraft centring on the activities of the Sabbat—"a midnight gathering of demons, sorcerers and witches"—and operative witchcraft concerned with spells and incantations. It is noteworthy that de Lancre, one of the contemporary mediaeval authorities, made a similar distinction:

"There are two sorts of witches, the first sort are composed of witches who, having abandoned God, give themselves to drugs and poisons. The second are those who have made an express renunciation of Jesus Christ and of the Faith and have given themselves to Satan. These perform wonders."

It was not only women who were involved. The head of the covens are particularly described as men, representing the Devil. Nor was it only the poorest and most defenceless sections of the community who were open to the charge, although obviously it was easier to move against them. Of note, for the present argument, is the fact that midwives were particularly anathema to the witch-hunters. So many priests also attended the Sabbat that at one time this was a difficult problem for the authorities.

The Bull of Pope Innocent VIII (1484) and the handbook for the persecution of witches by Sprenger and Kramer, the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1489) are often credited with creating much of the witchcraft of the period. This view would seem to mistake and again too sharply to segregate cause and effect. Certainly the *Malleus* was a direct consequence of the Bull but both arose from a common background of struggle against the witch-cult. Both certainly heightened the belief in what witches could do but the persecution as such can hardly be credited with creating its martyrs. The witch-cult must be seen as a social phenomenon, one manifestation of the failure of those responsible for social order to cope with the problems of the day. To this was added the attraction of drugs which cut across the boundaries of persecutors and persecuted. The religious authorities added the crime of heresy to that of magic, thus unleashing



the full force of the established religion against the cult.

*The hallucinogen hypothesis*—Running throughout the mediaeval period, as earlier, is the story of drugs. The Biblical term for a witch is the same as for her cauldron and, in Latin, *veneficium* means drug, poison or magic. It seems that many of the witches were drug addicts, as de Lancre suggested. In this connection, it is pertinent that the witch-cult and the persecutions seem to have gained prominence after the Crusades.

Nowadays we accept that mental life

has organic representation in the central nervous system. Conversely, organic features, whether illness or drugs, are known to affect mental states; the delirium of fever and intoxication with alcohol are the most obvious examples. A special branch of pharmacology has recently developed to deal with the effect of drugs on emotional states and psychic behaviour, although the subject itself is as old as medicine and society. In particular, primitive religions have used drugs for facilitating and producing abnormal states of mind. Individually and in groups, men have hankered to make the monotony and toil

*Hallucinogens were probably responsible for visitations by demons which witches claimed to have experienced, as in this work by Ryckaert (this picture and the one on the following page by courtesy of Radio Times Hulton Picture Library)*



## DRUGS OF THE DEVIL *continued*

of everyday life more bearable; paradoxically, modern life, with its greater variability and leisure, also seems to invite the use of drugs—sometimes for the contrary effect of quietening and soothing those unable to cope as well as for lifting the bored and frustrated out of their seemingly pointless existence and providing an emotional background which they cannot develop normally.

The drugs of greatest interest in relation to witchcraft are the hallucinogens. As the name suggests, these produce hallucinations, with a transient feeling of emotional richness which it is impossible to describe. An important distinction should be made between the use of these drugs for strictly religious purposes, particularly in groups and after purificatory rites or fasting, and the use by individuals—the latter being much more destructive of personality.

Those which have received most attention in modern times are mescaline, lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) and psilocybin

(see "Weapons against the mind", Vol. 26, page 224). Mescaline was used by the Aztecs of Mexico for religious and magic rituals and was well described by Spanish historians when they first encountered it. LSD is a semi-synthetic drug derived from lysergic acid, a product of fungus growth—ergot of rye. Ergot occasionally contaminated flour of the Middle Ages and may have been responsible for some of the manias which swept Europe in that period. Psilocybin comes from a South American mushroom, *Stropharia cubensis*.

Of more immediate interest in the study of witchcraft are other drugs which have been known for much longer in Europe and the East but which have so far not had intensive scientific study. The Solanaceae, the group of plants which includes the potato, tomato and the tobacco, are said to comprise 85 genera and 1800 species, a few of which are of importance to us. One is *Atropa belladonna* which should, on its name alone, have merited more attention. The Cannabinaceae are a second important group and include the common hop and the rather more potent hemp. Hashish is, of course, derived from Indian hemp. Its narcotic properties are only marked

in the plant grown in hot climates; it is said to be mentioned in early Hindu and Chinese writings on medicine. The name itself is traced to the Mohammedan sect known as Hashishin (whence also "assassin") which came into contact with the Crusaders in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

Although such drugs are of very great antiquity there are, not surprisingly, very few written references to them. They were closely guarded secrets as important to the state and to individuals as are armaments of modern times—and were used at times for equally lethal purposes.

A contemporary description of a witches' Sabbath will make it immediately obvious to those aware of the properties of drugs what was happening. In the following example, even the details of visual disturbance match closely what many twentieth-century patients experience with the local use of atropine to dilate the pupil.

"Joanna Michaelis of Chateau-Salins in 1590 added that the eyes of those who attend such assemblies are not sure and clear of sight, but that all is confused and disturbed and appears vague to them, like those who are blinded by

*A sixteenth century fantasy depicting the witches "sabbat"—a midnight gathering of members of the cult. Both male and female witches attended*



drunkenness or some sin or some magic. Thus witches sometimes are actually present at the Sabbat; and often again they are fast asleep at home, and yet think that they are at the Sabbat. For the Devil deceives their senses and through his illusions many imaginings may enter the minds of sleepers, leaving them with a conviction of their reality when they awake, as if it were not a dream but an actual experience and undoubted physical action. For so for the most part does the crafty Devil manage his affairs." (Guazzo, *Compendium Maleficarum*, 1608.)

It is, indeed, remarkable how many of the witches contributed to the general credulity by their insistence in their own trafficking with the Devil. Yet, in terms of modern psychopharmacology, we can deduce that in the deliria evoked by drugs, imaginings could be fixed and be remembered subsequently as real events. Many "confessions" were of course extracted from innocent women by torture and brain-washing techniques.

"To hold a candle to the Devil" is an old expression and arises from the use of candles at the Sabbat. An important incidental feature confirms the presence of drugs. The candles are described as black and as burning with a blue flame. This colour is most readily produced by the presence of potassium, presumably in the form of plants in the actual candle. We now know, as indeed did Guazzo, that drug fumes can be absorbed, although Guazzo speaks of them as working on the heart rather than the head.

One of the most frequent charges

against witches was that they produced impotence and interfered with normal sexuality. All these drugs—including modern "pep pills"—do have an influence on sex urges, possibly arising at times from the circumstances of taking the drugs but far more commonly resulting from the direct effects of the drugs.

No doubt the heightened emotional tensions of the witchcraft period had their crop of psychologically induced impotence but there must have been sufficient number of devotees and ex-devotees of the cult who were drug victims to add weight to the charge. The extreme preoccupation of the judges with this sexual aspect did not really indicate a pathological state of mind though some of the judges were obviously extreme sadists and found acceptable expression in the name of piety and orthodoxy for their own depraved behaviour. Again, from the sharpness of the recorded descriptions it would seem that it was not only the witches who took the drugs: some of the judges speak with convictions that might have arisen from participation. All "superstitious objects" were removed from witches: from the descriptions, although gruesome ingredients are mentioned, there is little doubt that drugs were implicated. In the shaving of their heads, any ointment they might secrete in their hair would also be removed. Since the judges often found themselves in possession of "superstitious objects" taken from the witches it is not an unreasonable surmise that some of them became victims of the drugs also.

Insanity is known to be a possible conse-

quence of delirium and there can be little doubt that for some of the devotees the experience of a Sabbat was too much; drugs were not so refined and dosages were not easily gauged in those days. Thus the charge that witches drove people mad may well have had a basis in fact, although undoubtedly some who were already mad joined the witches.

In the light of modern knowledge, then, we can no longer dismiss the phenomena of witchcraft and the witch persecution as being due only to the ignorance and superstition of the Middle Ages or, as some would have it, to abnormal sexuality, cruelty or delusions. There will always be much that we cannot know about mediaeval witchcraft and to approach the truth we must consider the contemporary reports objectively in the light of modern medical and scientific knowledge. Some instances like the later infamous witch-hunt in Salem, Massachusetts, had no foundation in reality; but about much of mediaeval witchcraft it is plainly much more plausible that known drugs were producing known effects than that intelligent men were simply inventing it all! That they clothed their beliefs and views in the theological terms of the day was merely a stamp of the time.

*Persecution of witches reached large proportions at various times in history. This woodcut shows a mass execution of English witches in the sixteenth or seventeenth century (reproduced from A Treasury of Witchcraft, Vision Press Limited)*



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*(Drugs of the devil, pages 222-225)*

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