

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository:<https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/172886/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Machielsen, Jan 2024. The origins of the Sabbat: A brief Basque case study. *Groniek Historisch Tijdschrift* 238

Publishers page:

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies. See <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



The Origins of the Sabbat: A Brief Basque Case Study

Even by the standards of early modern witches' gatherings, the Basque sabbat was exceptional. Neither the French judges nor the Spanish inquisitors who confronted the witchcraft panic of 1609 quite knew what to do with the sensational testimony they gathered. Basque *sorginak* did not simply feast on the bodies of dead babies, as witches were said to do elsewhere, they dug up the bodies of deceased witches from cemeteries and consumed *those*. They did not simply adore the devil by kissing him on the backside, the devil also sucked their blood. And above all, witches brought their children to the sabbat – the really young ones were playing with toads while their parents were having sex with Satan. The Spanish inquisitors descended into years of factional infighting, arguing amongst themselves whether any of it was real or one giant demonic delusion. In France, one of the judges, Pierre de Lancre, was kept spellbound by the sabbat and, in 1612, published a sensational account of this nocturnal netherworld.

Rationalists versus Romantics

Where do these strange sabbat beliefs come from?¹ The origins of the sabbat have vexed historians since the nineteenth century. So-called rationalists saw the sabbat as nothing more than projections of the warped imaginations of the persecutors themselves, whether late medieval Dominican inquisitors or early modern witch-hunters. This idea remains tempting. There was a lot of very deviant sex to be had at the sabbat. It would have been very fitting (morally and narratively), if the sabbat consisted of nothing more than the sexually frustrated fantasies of learned and often celibate men. The often-gruesome nature of judges' investigations might point in the same direction. Accused witches, mostly women, must have had their persecutors' pre-conceived truths tortured out of them. For early historians, men (and, to my knowledge they were all men) such as Andrew Dickson White (1832–1918) and George Lincoln Burr (1857–1938), the sabbat (and witchcraft with it) was conjured up wholesale out of thin air, like the demons themselves. Witchcraft, as Burr described it, was nothing but 'the nightmare of a religion, the shadow of a dogma.'² It was smoke and mirrors, the sabbat simply did not exist.

Lined up against this rationalist position stands a motley crew that stretches from Jules Michelet (1798–1874) to the present day. The historiography usually describes them, rather awkwardly, as romantics. They were united in the belief that sabbats were, to some extent, real. Or rather, they maintained that something real lay hidden underneath the compromised trial records. They differed radically, however, on what this underlying reality was supposed to have been. On one extreme stood the self-styled Catholic clergyman Montague Summers (1880–1948) who thought the devil worship was real. In the preface to his 1928 translation, Summers described the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum* as 'admirable in spite of its trifling blemishes' and praised the courage of its Dominican authors.³ On the other (objectively more 'romantic') end, we might place Michelet. The French historian saw in witches' sabbats

¹ I follow Virginia Krause in using the French 'sabbat' to distinguish it from the Jewish sabbath, though the etymological overlap is, of course, highly significant: Virginia Krause, *Witchcraft, Demonology, and Confession in Early Modern France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

² Jan Machielsen, *The War on Witchcraft: Andrew Dickson White, George Lincoln Burr, and the Origins of Witchcraft Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 29.

³ Montague Summers, trans., *Malleus Maleficarum* (London: John Rodker, 1928), xl.

echoes of once great rebel communions, nocturnal meetings of peasant serfs who gathered to sing defiant medieval precursors to the *Marseillaise*.⁴

Particularly influential among the romantics were the writings of Margaret Murray (1863–1963), who claimed that ‘the ritual of the witches’ only becomes comprehensible once viewed in the light of a pagan fertility cult. In her view, the sabbat was a remnant of pre-Christian religion, whose rites ‘became gradually degraded into a method for blasting fertility.’⁵ Reclaimed by Carlo Ginzburg (who was always very careful to distinguish himself from Murray’s ‘amateurish, absurd’ methods), this approach transformed sabbat narratives into a quarry for a European or even Eurasian substratum of shamanistic beliefs.⁶ Crucially, however, many of those working this mine have been aligned to the modern Wiccan movement. For instance, Emma Wilby, who studied the Basque sabbat before me, was praised by an ally for showing ‘what Pagan witches might be able to achieve.’⁷

Where the sabbat is concerned, different starting positions feed dramatically different conclusions and insights. The appeal of the rationalist position might be especially evident: it conveniently sidesteps having to work with much of the source material at all. Witchcraft trials were not relevant for understanding the witch-hunt or the sabbat because they originated in the minds of malignant authors. At most, this testimony served as fodder – ‘the mental rubbish of peasant credulity and feminine hysteria’ in Hugh Trevor-Roper’s notorious phrase – for the elite construction of complex witchcraft mythologies.⁸ The rationalist approach seduces us with a false sense of moral clarity. Witchcraft was the product of inquisitorial fears and fantasies, and we can easily name and shame the culprits: the hunters themselves. But this clarity is achieved by *a priori* short-circuiting the research process. Rationalists erase the voices of the accused themselves because, as the victims of judicial torture, they cannot possibly have anything of interest or relevance to say.

Troublesome Sources

If a rationalist approach, in its purest form at least, cannot survive, it does have one advantage. By dismissing *all* the trial evidence and convicting the judges themselves, rationalists never have to make sense of the surviving testimony, let alone confront the demonic itself and the possibility that some of it was *real*. The latter suggestion may feel absurd, but methodological meditations should explore all avenues, especially those that instinctively repel us. In his groundbreaking but (in my view) often misread *Thinking with Demons* (1997), Stuart Clark criticized historians’ commitment to ‘the realist model of knowledge’, the assumption that because early moderns ‘were making a huge empirical mistake, their animosity towards witches has to be explained in something other than

⁴ Jules Michelet, *La Sorcière: The Witch of the Middle Ages*, trans. Lionel J. Trotter (London: Simpkin, Marshall, and Co., 1863), 143–45.

⁵ Margaret Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe: A Study in Anthropology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1921), 24.

⁶ Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches’ Sabbath* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), especially 8–10.

⁷ Emma Wilby, *Invoking the Akelarre: Voices of the Accused in the Basque Witch-Craze, 1609–1614* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2019); for this praise of Wilby’s earlier work, see Ronald Hutton, “Writing the History of Witchcraft: A Personal View,” *The Pomegranate* 12, no. 2 (2010): 239–62, at 250.

⁸ Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze of the 16th and 17th centuries* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 41.

conviction.⁹ Because we know (believe!) that demons, witches, and sabbats do not exist, we are certain that witch-hunting was based, not on sincere belief, but on hidden, often pathological motivations, from state-building to women-hating. Clark sidestepped this quest for ulterior motives by adopting a postmodernist approach, studying demonological literature as a self-contained linguistic system in which authorial intent does not (indeed, cannot) feature.

The Yale historian Carlos Eire has recently taken the same methodological problems in a very different direction. In his 2023 *They Flew*, Eire – a devout Catholic – argued that historians should be open to the possibility that early modern saints and witches really levitated or flew, as part of a clarion call ‘against the “dogmatic secularism” that permeates the academic study of religion.’¹⁰ The grouping of witches and saints is surprising. Where historians have long studied saints unbothered by the reality of their alleged miracles or visions, witches are very different. Eire is extremely critical of historians who take ‘for granted that the devil is *not* and *never* has been a “real” being, much less a causal agent, and that the only acceptable way to study witchcraft is to share in that assumption.’ In Eire’s view, it is our unwillingness to entertain the possibility that the devil was (or is?) real that has caused ‘the daunting task of explaining why’ early modern Europeans believed in his existence.¹¹ Seen in this light, the historical origins of the sabbat – or indeed, the witch-hunt – become a problem of our own making, the product of our own ‘secular’ starting point. This is a fair comment, but it ultimately leads us into some pretty dark corners. Methodologically, what is there left to explain if the witch-hunters (or saint-makers) were right? By having historians march to the dictates of the past, Eire is sending them to the job centre and the unemployment line. Ethically, too, it is a form of bankruptcy. The Yale historian is seemingly blind to the wider moral implications that have made scholars so reluctant to countenance the demonic. If we accept that witches flew, what are we to do with the grim fate that awaited so many of them? Eire is conveniently silent about that.

So far we have only unravelled a single strand – the projection of historians’ pre-occupations and beliefs onto the sources – and rightly so, as it holds others in place. If our starting point determines our conclusions, it does so because it dictates our working methods and shapes our source analysis. The fact that the surviving sources, often extracted under torture and always filtered through an elite lens, are clearly corrupted means that it is up to the historian to ‘penetrate this veil’ and let the subject speak for themselves.¹² To arrive at the lived experience or thought-world of an accused witch, we are forced to put ourselves in the position of the original judges (Ginzburg memorably imagined himself ‘looking over judges’ shoulders, dogging their footsteps’), while foolishly hoping that, with less information, we will arrive at a better judgement than they did.¹³

As a result, ‘romantics’ are often evidentiary contortionists. They stretch and bend their sources to fit their ideas, particularly when the witch-hunters had already ‘dimly’ perceived them. For this reason, they are at times surprisingly positive about Pierre de Lancre, the

⁹ Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4.

¹⁰ Carlos Eire, *They Flew: A History of the Impossible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), 372.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 339.

¹² For a powerful critique, aimed more at psychoanalytical than ethnographic approaches, see John H. Arnold, “The Historian as Inquisitor: The Ethics of Interrogating Subaltern Voices,” *Rethinking History* 2, no. 3 (1998): 379–86.

¹³ Carlo Ginzburg, “The Inquisitor as Anthropologist,” in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 141–48, at 143.

French witch-hunter who caused such misery in the Basque Country. His credibility as a witness was vital for their arguments, whatever his many faults and vices. For Michelet, de Lancre's 'evident connection with some young witches gave him something to say'; for Ginzburg, the judge 'observed the object of his persecution with a penetration often absent in the more detached observers of the subsequent century.'¹⁴ Sometimes such praise is meant to bolster a particular statement. Murray, for instance, introduced one lengthy quote with the claim that 'as usual de Lancre is at his best when making a general summary.'¹⁵ Yet, the veil can also obscure in a helpfully unfalsifiable way. Whatever is not in the sources, the judges must have been too dense or blinkered to notice.

Inevitably, the other way of shoring up romantic readings is through the identification of parallels elsewhere. This search for similarities sent Ginzburg from his original case study in the Friuli region of northeast Italy to Livonia on the Baltic Sea.¹⁶ In her study of the Basque sabbat, Emma Wilby roams wider still, not only drawing comparisons with early modern Sicily and England but with modern Brazil and China as well. She marshals a study of maternal neglect in a 1960s shanty town to explain some of the sabbat's more distasteful features: 'if, for the purposes of survival, twentieth-century Brazilian women were able to dehumanize living children to the extent that they could stand by and watch them being starved,' then for the same reasons, 'seventeenth-century European women may have been able to stand by and witness the bodies of dead children being processed into medicines.'¹⁷ Perhaps. The evidentiary value of such parallels is unclear. While they suggest plausibility, they emerge neither from a method, nor – strictly speaking – from the sources themselves, but from the associations that the historian *chooses* to make. They are, in other words, another projection. They also risk reducing the specificity of what is being studied to a mere instantiation of a wider European, Eurasian or simply human phenomenon. Are we rediscovering the past or just building a bigger sandcastle?

Basque Opportunities

Given all of this, we may perceive why the burgeoning field of witchcraft studies has comparatively neglected the sabbat. The methodological and ethical problems I have sketched out appear unsolvable. Scholars approach the subject at their peril, and probably risk revealing more about themselves than the sabbat. In the space that remains, however, I want to argue that a study of the Basque witch-hunt of 1609 offers a way forward, because its source material is not only exceptionally rich (as Wilby already realized) but also allows for methodological innovation.

The Basque witch-hunt straddled the French-Spanish border and thus involved two very different legal systems. As a result, we possess two sets of recorded testimony which passed into two different languages (neither the French judges nor the Spanish inquisitors spoke Basque) and were filtered through two very different legal bureaucracies. While this does not remove the elite filter, the two vantage points enable a form of triangulation which, I argue, brings popular, folkloric beliefs more clearly into focus. If we let ourselves be guided by both the similarities and differences between the French and Spanish documents, then we are

¹⁴ Michelet, *La Sorcière*, 143n (who also described de Lancre's account of the sabbat as the 'least bad'); Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 137.

¹⁵ Murray, *The Witch-Cult*, 137.

¹⁶ See Carlo Ginzburg and Bruce Lincoln, *Old Thiss, a Livonian Werewolf: A Classic Case in Comparative Perspective* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020).

¹⁷ Wilby, *Invoking the Akelarre*, 110–11.

shifting our starting position away from the historians to the sources themselves – letting them speak, to some extent, for themselves. This is not postmodernism, but as far as approaches to texts go it is inspired by Stuart Clark’s *Thinking with Demons*.

It is worth stressing that in both France and Spain the archival record is incomplete. For the French side, we are almost entirely reliant on Pierre de Lancre’s already mentioned eye-witness account, which does at least cite from the original testimony. De Lancre had been one of the two witchcraft commissioners sent from Bordeaux to the Pays de Labourd, a Basque-speaking border territory. For four months, from early July to 1 November 1609, the two judges conducted their investigations without any possibility of appeal, with perhaps as many as 80 women and men losing their lives as a result. De Lancre’s subsequent 1612 *Tableau de l’inconstance des mauvais anges et démons* offered an exceptionally rich, indeed nearly pornographic, account of the witches’ sabbat that (as we saw) has been enthusiastically pillaged by romantics.

For Spain, the archival sources are richer. Copies of some of the sentences have survived, as have reports by the local inquisitors, based in the northern town of Logroño, to their superiors in Madrid. For different reasons the Inquisition was nearly as obsessed and perplexed by the sabbat as de Lancre, treating witchcraft in much the same way as it treated its other religious targets: Jews, Muslims and Protestants. Like them, witches were seen as members of a heretical sect, though a particularly ‘diabolical, vain, false and infernal’ one.¹⁸ The Inquisition’s attention thus also centred on the sabbat as a site of idolatrous worship, although the material it gathered was considerably less sexually explicit than de Lancre’s *Tableau*. The question whether sabbats took place in real life or were demonic illusions (the devil causing witches to *imagine* they attended them) proved particularly vexing. In time the reality of the sabbat would divide the three inquisitors of the Logroño tribunal into two warring factions, pitching the sceptical Alonso de Salazar Frías against the ‘believers’ Juan de Valle Alvarado and Alonso Becerra Holguín.¹⁹ It is this dispute that gave rise to the longest and most important source: a lengthy manifesto in which the two believers defended the reality of the sabbat as a place where witches really feasted, danced, and even got rained on.²⁰

For our comparison, one location is of especial importance. The Spanish village of Zugarramurdi lay just across the border from the Pays de Labourd (Lapurdi in Basque). It was here that witchcraft fears apparently first made landfall in Spain. Crucially, for our purposes, this happened well before the arrival of the Bordeaux judges in the Labourd. In December 1608, 16-year-old María de Ximildegui arrived from Ciboure on the French side and began to accuse some of the villagers of being members of a secret witches’ cult.²¹ The Inquisition acted swiftly, imprisoning ten suspected witches in Logroño between January and February 1609.²² In other words, the suspects appeared before the tribunal, some 100 miles away from the border, several months prior to the arrival of the French judges in the Labourd. Kept in miserable conditions, most confessed before July, and all had done so by September 1609.²³ Contact between the French and Spanish judges was extremely limited at a time when

¹⁸ Madrid, Archivo Histórico Nacional [hereafter, AHN], Inq., Lib. 835, fol. 386r.

¹⁹ For a still very helpful account of this dispute, see Gustav Henningsen, *The Witches’ Advocate: Basque Witchcraft and the Spanish Inquisition, 1609–1614* (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 1980).

²⁰ Published as Florencio Idoate, ed., *Un documento de la Inquisición sobre Brujería en Navarra* (Pamplona: Aranzadi, 1972).

²¹ AHN, Inq., Lib. 835, fol. 340r–v; transcribed in Gustav Henningsen, ed., *The Salazar Documents: Inquisitor Alonso de Salazar Frías and Others on the Basque Witch Persecution* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 107.

²² Henningsen, *The Witches’ Advocate*, 52, 55.

²³ For these dates, see Henningsen, *The Witches’ Advocate*, 61–65, 69.

geo-political tensions were running high.²⁴ There is, then, no obvious way how the two trials could have contaminated or influenced each other.

Zugarramurdi matters not only because of chronology but because of geography as well. As Inquisition officials well-knew, the village and the neighbouring monastery of Urdax were situated in the same valley as the French Labourd, while mountains isolated them from the rest of Spain.²⁵ Economically, though not politically, Zugarramurdi and Urdax were part of France. When, in 1611, it came to confiscating the witches' meagre belongings, the abbot of Urdax warned the inquisitors that there was only French money and 'not a single *real*' to be found 'in these lands.'²⁶ The inhabitants had strong ties to their Lapurdi neighbours to their north, speaking the same Basque dialect and intermarrying.²⁷ Given these close ties, there is every reason to believe that their sabbat beliefs aligned. Almost every place mentioned in the surviving evidence from Zugarramurdi is located north of the border.²⁸ We therefore possess two sets of sources, which independently passed through two legal systems, but crucially they all relate to the *same* set of beliefs. Comparing the French and Spanish sources, therefore, should shed light on both sets of judges and the shared world of beliefs that they were independently exploring.

Some of the similarities are obvious: one would expect stories of dancing, feasting and sex at the witches' sabbat. The fact that the devil usually appeared as a black man or a goat is also fairly commonplace. More significant is the sabbat's strongly hierarchical nature. On both sides, the witches were led by queens (and on the Spanish side, also kings) who acted as the community's leaders. As 'queen' of the Zugarramurdi sabbat, Graciana de Barrenechea confessed to taking some of the human meat home with her, as a perk of her position, where she and 'friendly witches' consumed it with bread and wine.²⁹ The comparison also throws up differences, however. On the Spanish side, the queens were clearly elderly matriarchs – Graciana was in her eighties – while the queens encountered by de Lancre were 'young and beautiful'.³⁰ It is tempting to attribute this discrepancy to de Lancre's overly active sexual imagination; for him, Basque women – their bewitching eyes, 'as dangerous in love as in witchcraft' – were nearly as seductive as the devil.³¹

Another sexual difference between the French and Spanish sources points to the same conclusion. The abundance of evidence of male homosexual activity forms a notable – and by European standards, highly unusual – part of the Zugarramurdi material.³² The sources contain a number of notable instances of Zugarramurdi men having anal sex not just with the devil but also with each other.³³ In their report, the inquisitors Valle and Becerra observed

²⁴ De Lancre acknowledges one brief exchange; the inquisitors offered to draw up a list of witchcraft refugees in Spain but the French judges replied that they did not want them back: Pierre de Lancre, *Tableau de l'inconstance des mauvais anges et démons* (Paris, 1612), 41.

²⁵ The point about geography was well-made by Valle in his letter of 20 August 1609: AHN, Lib. 794, fol. 459r.

²⁶ AHN, Inq., L. 1679, exp. 2., image 1.

²⁷ On the dialect, see Mikel Azurmendi, *Las Brujas de Zugarramundi: la historia del aquelarre y la Inquisición* (Córdoba: Almuzara, 2013), 13.

²⁸ The only exception is Pamplona, home not only to a senior devil but also, probably not coincidentally, the residence of the local bishop: AHN, Inq., Lib. 835, fols. 391r, 397v.

²⁹ Idoate, ed., *Un documento*, 137.

³⁰ De Lancre, *Tableau*, 223.

³¹ De Lancre, *Tableau*, 42.

³² As Noel Malcolm has recently noted, the link between witchcraft and sodomy was surprisingly weak: Noel Malcolm, *Forbidden Desire in Early Modern Europe: Male-Male Sexual Relations, 1400–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 111–12.

³³ AHN, Inq., Lib. 832, fols. 170v, 171v, 173v; Inq., Lib. 835, fol. 398v; Idoate, ed., *Un documento*, 143.

that witches not only had intercourse with the devil (he engaged in ‘normal and anal intercourse with the women and sodomy with the men’) but also with each other, ‘male with female and male with male.’³⁴ In the Labourd, by contrast, the devil appears aggressively heterosexual – much like de Lancre himself. When the devil ordered his Lapurdi witches to couple up in ways that ‘nature abhors the most’, all the combinations listed – daughter and father, sister and brother – were incestuous but straight.³⁵ There is only one arguable, fleeting reference in the *Tableau* to two teenage boys ‘sleeping together’, which may take on a new meaning and significance in this context.³⁶

In other instances, the similarities – even in the smallest details – are much more noticeable. Here, an evidentiary imbalance between the French and Spanish sources can be especially revealing, both about folkloric beliefs and the judges’ preoccupations. One particularly arresting example must suffice here. The Zugarramurdi suspects confessed that, having abandoned Christ, they were no longer able to see the Eucharist – that is, the communion wafer which Catholics considered to be Christ’s real body – during Mass.³⁷ Indeed, it was María de Ximildegui’s desire to see Him again rather than a ‘black cloud’ that had caused the 16-year-old to repent her entry into the devil’s service and make her accusations.³⁸ The evidence for this belief is weaker in de Lancre’s *Tableau* but not altogether absent. He reported that, ‘before she was saved,’ 28-year-old Marie de la Ralde could only see the Host as ‘black even when it was white’. Another witness, Jeanette d’Abadie, trembled whenever the priest elevated the communion wafer.³⁹ That the religious significance of these stories was more important to Spain’s inquisitors than it was to France’s judges is not surprising. The fact that the detail can be found in both sets of sources strongly suggests that it did not originate with the interrogators.

Conclusion

The argument of this essay is not that Basque sabbats were in any way real. Indeed, six of the Zugarramurdi witchcraft suspects imprisoned by the Inquisition had travelled to Logroño on their own accord in order to prove that they were *not* witches – they confessed after months of misery and confinement.⁴⁰ The comparative approach outlined here, however, does bring into focus both the *real* folkloric origins of the surviving testimony and the pre-occupations of the judges, who through their questioning and editing subsequently reshaped part of it. The similarities between French and Spanish sources are, however, also undeniable. Those who testified and confessed drew on deep wells of local folklore to tell stories that they knew or heard told. These revealed details that were so strange and unexpected – Eucharists hidden by black clouds – that they cannot have emerged from judges’ imaginations, as well as other aspects – gay sex – that did not interest some of the judges at all. Sabbats may have been fictions constructed under duress, but the surviving testimony still contains a historical core of genuine folkloric beliefs. What those beliefs meant, and where they in turn came from, are questions for another time – or rather, another publication.⁴¹

³⁴ Henningsen, ed., *Salazar Documents*, 125.

³⁵ De Lancre, *Tableau*, 223.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

³⁷ See e.g. AHN, Inq., Lib. 835, fol. 398r; Lib. 832, fol. 171r.

³⁸ Henningsen, ed., *Salazar Documents*, 109.

³⁹ De Lancre, *Tableau*, 128, 135.

⁴⁰ AHN, Inq., Lib. 835, fol. 388r; Inq., Lib. 832, fol. 170r.

⁴¹ Jan Machielsen, *The Basque Witch-Hunt: A Secret History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024).