

### The Witch Trials: Salem and Beyond

Witch Trials were a series of prosecution of people accused of witchcraft back in the 17th century. Even though it is mostly labeled as “Salem Witch Trials” with the most infamous witch hunt and trial, arrests were made in several villages and towns including Salem Village, Ipswich, Andover, and Salem Town, Massachusetts, and in different countries such as Germany, Italy, France, Switzerland, and Benelux countries. The reasons and motivations behind these trials which lead to the tragic execution of 40.000 to 60.000 people who were arrested and prosecuted were indeed a collective justification of different subjects.

The main reason for such a tragic occurrence to take place was that people of the time were Puritans, that is, Christians who had extremely rigid rules and a strict moral code. Those who did not follow this lifestyle were considered to be easy targets for the Devil and thus were regarded as sinners. This also explains the reason why most of those who were accused of witchcraft were people who strayed from the Puritan lifestyle or social outcasts; in the end, they were not considered to be a part of society. One theory about the Salem Witch Trials is that the ministers of the community planned the whole thing to drive people back to church and prove that they are able to get rid of “evil spirits”.

The witch trials started earlier in Europe and when it started in the New World, it was already fading away in Europe. England was an important center for the latest witch hunts and trials in the continent where these events can be traced back until the 14th century. In England, witch trials are known to occur in Middle Ages, however; at first, the hunt was not as extreme as the upcoming ones. They were more toward to elite part of the society and the reasons behind it were political. In the second half of the 16th century, the witch hunt spread and widened. The trials and cases became more frequent at the end of the 16th century and at the beginning of the 17th century. One of the main reasons for this increase was the accession of James VI since King James immensely paid attention to the witch trials. He was influenced by the witch trials in Copenhagen which actually triggered the North Berwick trials in Scotland. After the succession to the throne, King James implemented the English Witchcraft Act further deeply. In time, around 500 were claimed to have been executed for witchcraft in England. The witch trials legally ended in England after the introduction of the Witchcraft Act in 1735. However, before this regulation both in England and in the colonies where English law was applicable, there have been cataclysmic results because of the widespread witch hunt and trials. Especially in North America, there had been severe cases mainly in Connecticut, Boston, Charlestown, and Salem.

The most well-known example of the witch trials is undoubtedly the Salem Witch Trials that took place between 1692-1693 in Massachusetts, Salem. It is an actually tragic story now that people know the truth of it, but the ignorance that surrounded the town back then ended in the unjustifiable death of so many people. What started with two little girls having fits and the not-so-bright doctor’s diagnose of bewitchment resulted in more than 200 people being accused. Out of that number, 19 were found guilty and hanged, 14 of them being women. One man was

crushed to death and at least 5 people died in jail. These instances also serve to prove the falseness of the assumption that people were burned at the stake for being witches during the Witch Trials.

The first three women that were targeted reflect the criterion mentioned above clearly. One of them was a homeless beggar with “unladylike behavior”, so she did not really have a place in society that would protect her. The other one, on the other hand, was a wealthy woman, but she did not attend church regularly. In addition, she was a widow whose past marriages were disapproved and who faced judgement because of rumors of her having premarital sexual relationships with men. The last of these three women was a Native American slave and was mainly targeted because of her ethnic differences. She was also one of the slaves in the house of the little girls who got sick and was accused of telling them stories about sexual encounters with the Devil. As it is obvious even from these three examples only, the judgement and targeting of people considered to practice witchcraft were heavily based on societal prejudices and rumors.

Later on, at a less ignorant time period with intelligent people who studied science and medicine, scientists tried to explain the actual reason behind the Salem Witch Trials. Trying to figure out what caused the little girls to experience fits, the most reasonable conclusion they came to was the fungus ergot. It is a substance found in rye, which was consumed then, and it causes delusions, vomiting, and muscle spasms. There is also the possibility that there was a hysteria outbreak since it was a post-war period and people were filled with resentment and suspicion.

The Salem Witch Trials is considered to be the deadliest witch hunt in history. To think that the ignorant and manipulative nature of some people was what caused such an occurrence is sickening. Afterward, the people of Salem were ashamed of themselves for causing such a massacre and started to hold a day of prayer known as the Day of Official Humiliation.

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