

# Witches and Devil's Magic in Austrian Demonological Legends

*Christa Agnes Tuczay*

## INTRODUCTION AND SHORT OUTLINE OF ACADEMIC DEBATE CONCERNING THE DEFINITION OF A FOLK LEGEND

Witches are a constituent part not only of Austrian folklore but of Austrian folk legend. Therefore, it is necessary to not only give the term 'legend' some thought but discuss the boundaries and intersections of the main topics involved. Legends of witches and demonological crimes touch the general question of how historical crime reports become legendary tales and can be testimonies for a history of mentality. This question was raised by the founder of German philology (and subsequently European ethnology and folklore studies), Jacob Grimm. If we look at the definition of those texts that deal with witches and demonological crimes, German *Sagen* and its English translation 'legend', we must go back to Grimm. Grimm's *Wörterbuch* defines legend as *kunde von ereignissen der vergangenheit, welche einer historischen beglaubigung*

---

C.A. Tuczay (✉)  
University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria  
e-mail: [christa.tuczay@univie.ac.at](mailto:christa.tuczay@univie.ac.at)

*entbehrt*<sup>1</sup> ('stories of the past that lack historical accreditation'). He further speaks of naive storytelling and the transmission that has undergone changes while being passed down from generation to generation.

In German narratology, the terms *Sage* (translated into English by the term 'legend') and *Legende* (in German Folklore research normally used to categorise religious tales) are distinguished from each other.<sup>2</sup> It is known that sacrilege and crime are an integral part of the stories commonly known as folk legends (German *Sagen*). Following Grimm's principles, three kinds of folk legends have been identified: historical, defined as those related to an event or a personality of historical significance; mythological or demonological, or those having to do with human encounters with the supernatural world and endowment with supernatural power<sup>3</sup> and knowledge; and etiological or explanatory, about the nature and origins of animate and inanimate things. The practice with legends showed that this threefold classification proved to be too limited because legends may be simultaneously historical, mythological and explanatory. Nevertheless, most folk-legend anthologies follow these distinctions and classify witch legends under the category demonological. Although I agree with other researchers that such categories, being restrictive and inaccurate,<sup>4</sup> can only show rough tendencies, I would still

---

<sup>1</sup>This paper is a revised and completed version of Christa Agnes Tucza, 'Die Darstellung der Hexe in den österreichischen Sagen', in Marion George and Andrea Rudolph (eds.), *Hexen: Historische Faktizität und fiktive Bildlichkeit*. Kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge. Quellen und Forschungen, 3. (Dettelbach, 2004), 91–121. *Das Grimmsche Wörterbuch*, vol. XIV 1893, col. 1644; <http://woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB/?sigle=DWB&mode=Vernetzung&lemid=GS00585#XGS00585>.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Hans-Jörg Uther, 'Überlegungen zur Klassifizierung alpenländischer Sagen' in Leander Petzold and S. de Rachewiltz (eds.), *Studien zur Volkserzählung. Berichte und Referate des ersten und zweiten Symposions zur Volkserzählung, Brunnenburg/Südtirol 1984/85* (Frankfurt a. M., 1987), 57–74, here 60.

<sup>3</sup>Witches' supernatural powers in the legends stem from their pact with the devil. For example, such paranormal 'talents' as remote viewing: Leander Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus Vorarlberg* (Munich, 1994), 22–3.

<sup>4</sup>For the historian Klaus Graf, the term *historical legend* is too inconsistent. In several articles he has demanded we abandon the term historical legend. Although some of his arguments are worth considering, owing to a lack of a fitting substitute, researchers still use the term historical legend rather than an alternative such as urban legend: 'Thesen zur Verabschiedung des Begriffs der "historischen Sage"', *Fabula* 29 (1988), 21–47 and the literary references compiled by the same author: 'Sage', in Thomas Meier, Bettina Marquis, Charlotte Bretscher-Gisiger (eds.), *Lexikon des Mittelalters* 7 (Munich and Zürich, 1995), 1254–7. Cf. Jörn Eckert, 'Sage' in Adalbert Erler and Ekkehard

propose the term *demonological legend*, especially for witch and witchcraft legends.

On some topics, the onset of legend creation began rather early: for example, the famous case of the Salzburger Zauberer Jackl<sup>5</sup> might even have started in his lifetime, whereas other stories show less evidence of being public during the period to which they relate. The witch figure also consolidates neighbouring concepts of similar or related figures like ghost and revenant, but also older mythological figures like Percht,<sup>6</sup> Wild Women, giantess and *Schbrätel* or *Bilwis*.<sup>7</sup> The latter stem from the Middle Ages or even Antiquity and are surely not reflections of witch trials and their ensuing narratives. Consequently, Lutz Röhrich and, with some restrictions, Claude Lecouteux have<sup>8</sup> argued for the *tunrida* or *hagazussa* as being more or less a demon of the woods. The typical motifs of the witch legends, riding on home appliances and flying to a mountain, appear as early as the Middle Ages. In medieval German literature, the Lower Austrian medieval author Stricker (first half of the thirteenth century) describes the *Unholden* as riding on a broomstick

---

Kaufmann (eds.), *Handwörterbuch zur deutschen Rechtsgeschichte*, 4 (1990), 1253–6, references 1255; Eberhard Freiherr von Künßberg, 'Rechtserinnerung und vergessenes Recht', in *Wirtschaft und Kultur: Festschrift zum 70. Geburtstag von Alfons Dopsch*, (Vienna, 1938), 581–90, here 586; Leander Petzold, 'Zur Phänomenologie und Funktion der Sage: Möglichkeiten der Interpretation von Volkssagen in der Gegenwart' in Petzold and de Rachewitz (eds.), *Studien*, 201–22; Hans-Jörg Uther, 'Sagen: Überblick über den gegenwärtigen Forschungsstand', *Trictrac. Journal of World Mythology and Folklore*, 5 (2012), 83–90; Maja Bošković-Stulli, 'Hexensagen und Hexenprozesse in Kroatien', *Acta Ethnographica Acad. Sc. Hung.*, 37 (1991/2), 143–71. See also a series of articles in the journal *Forschungen zur Rechtsarchäologie und Rechtlichen Volkskunde*: Louis Carlen, 'Rechtliches in französischen Sagen', 6 (1984), 143–65; Francisca Schmid-Naef, 'Recht und Gerechtigkeit in den Sagen der Alpenkantone', 10 (1988), 131–62; Felici Maissen, 'Schuld und Sühne in der ernerischen Volkssage', 12 (1990), 153–83; Linus Hüsser, 'Das Recht in den Volkssagen des Fricktales', 13 (1991), 281–304.

<sup>5</sup>See subsequent discussion.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Leander Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus Salzburg* (Munich, 1993) 181–4. Willem de Blécourt is preparing a collection of essays on pre-formations of the sabbath that will include the latest research on the Percht (see n. 72).

<sup>7</sup>Claude Lecouteux, 'Der Bilwiz' in his *Eine Welt im Abseits* (Dettelbach, 2000), 75–90.

<sup>8</sup>Lutz Röhrich, 'Sage' in Rolf Brednich (ed.), *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, 11 (Berlin, 2004), 1018–41; Claude Lecouteux, 'Auf den Spuren einer vergessenen kleinen Gottheit' in his *Eine Welt*, 117–38.

(1230), and the flight to a mountain is mentioned in the *Münchener Nachtsegen* of the fourteenth century.<sup>9</sup>

Within three years, two German scholars published a thesis and type index of witch legends. Alfred Wittmann in Mannheim defended a dissertation with the title *Die Gestalt der Hexe in der deutschen Sage* (1933), and in 1936 the folklorist and folk-song expert Johannes Künzig issued a type index: *Typensystem der deutschen Volksage* with the subcategory witch legends.<sup>10</sup> Both favour nearly the same topics: how to recognise a witch<sup>11</sup>; metamorphosis; witch ride; witch assembly and witch dance; different kinds of witches (cattle, milk, butter, and egg witches).<sup>12</sup> A chapter about *maleficium* and the specific magic arts of the witch concludes the index. Wittmann begins with the witch in the witch trials, thereby incorporating the witchcraft research and discourse of his time. After the war Will-Erich Peuckert's *Handwörterbuch der Sage* attempted to establish an international legend codification of similar functions like the acknowledged Aarne/Thompson *Type Index* and Stith Thompson's

---

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Christa Agnes Tuczay, 'Der Dichter als Aufklärer: Aberglaubenskritik im süddeutschen Raum', *Zeitschrift für Deutsche Philologie*, 122 (2003), 280–93.

<sup>10</sup>Johannes Künzig, *Typensystem der deutschen Volksage. Gruppe B: Hexensagen* (Freiburg, 1936); Alfred Wittmann, 'Die Gestalt der Hexe in der deutschen Sage' (unpubl. Ph.D. thesis, Heidelberg, 1933).

<sup>11</sup>A very peculiar method to discover a witch is mentioned in a Burgenlandian tale: sitting on the chair of St. Lucia one can see all the witches in church: Leander Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus dem Burgenland* (Munich, 1994), 40–1. Cf. Stith Thompson, *Motif Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books and Local Legends*, 6 vols. (Copenhagen, 1956), Mot. G250. 'Recognition of witches'.

<sup>12</sup>In a small village in the lower Austrian Kamp Valley, a tailor observed that a peasant woman never ran out of butter that she had made from a certain powder and cream. He secretly stole a bit of the powder and tried to make butter at home. When he made the butter, the devil appeared with a book in his hand demanding that he had to sign. He signed with the name of Jesus, and the devil and book disappeared: Leander Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus Niederösterreich* (Munich, 1992), 42–3. Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus Vorarlberg*, 20–2; in the Carinthian tale the devil appears as a hunter demanding that the witch's husband sign in his black book. Cf. Leander Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus Kärnten* (Munich, 1993), 15–16; Walter Brunner, *Steirische Sagen von Hexen und Zauberern* (Graz, 1987), no. 9, 60–2; the witch on her deathbed calls for the minister who asks for her magic book. At home, he tries it out and makes butter, while the witch can no longer do so without her book. When she complains, the minister gives her the butter but burns her book: *ibid.*, nos. 26 and 69.

*Motif-Index*. Unfortunately, Peuckert's handbook ended with the first volume with letter A and was never continued.<sup>13</sup> So researchers should still turn to Stith Thompson's *Motif Index of Folk Literature* of 1956 and all the follow-up indices, that display the entry G200-G299 witches. Ernest Baughman offered an elaboration of certain witch motifs in his *Type and Motif Index of the Folktales of England and North America* in 1966.<sup>14</sup>

In 1987 the historian Walter Brunner self-published the anthology *Steirische Sagen von Hexen und Zauberern*, which, unfortunately, did not get the attention it deserved, but I have used it here. Finally, the *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, a German reference work on folktales and legends (begun by Kurt Ranke in the 1960s and continued by chief editor Rolf Brednich), contains several articles on the topics of justice, injustice, punishment, legend and witch.<sup>15</sup>

The witch figure of the folktale and the witch of the legend are rightfully distinguished from each other as two different contextual types, although they sometimes overlap. Whereas not only historical but also demonological legend is factual, folktales are considered fictional. This alleged dichotomy or opposition is often erroneous because legends are just as fictional as folktales, while the latter often mirror, if not historical occurrences, then historical lawsuits and punishments. Another point of intersection is that both concern magical practice and the devil.

---

<sup>13</sup>Will-Erich Peuckert's project *Handwörterbuch der deutschen Sage* (Göttingen, 1961) did not get beyond the first volume. Cf. Luth Röhrich's attempts, and his encounter with Peuckert's legacy, in Wolfgang Mieder, Siegfried Neumann, Christoph Schmitt, Sabine Wienker-Piepho (eds.), *Begegnungen, Erinnerungen an meinen Freundeskreis. Mit bibliographischen Anmerkungen und einem Gesamtverzeichnis der Publikationen Röhrichs* (Münster and New York, 2016). See also Willem de Blécourt's reflections in 'The Witch, Her Victim, the Unwitcher and the Researcher: The Continued Existence of Traditional Witchcraft' in Willem de Blécourt, Ronald Hutton and Jean la Fontaine, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Twentieth Century* (1999), 143–219, esp. 165–8.

<sup>14</sup>Both incorporate the witchcraft research of their time. Thompson, *Motif Index*, vol. III, G243 'Witch's Sabbath', 295 and Ernest Baughman, *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America* (The Hague, 1966), 249.

<sup>15</sup>The entries under the headings by Rainer Wehse, 'Gerechtigkeit und Ungerechtigkeit', in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* 3 (Berlin, 1987), 1050–64; Rolf-Wilhelm Brednich, 'Hinrichtung', in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* 4 (1990), 1053–60 and Christine Shojaei Kawan, 'Mord', in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* 6 (1998), 856–76 and their footnotes may serve as a good starting point for researching the topic of punishment.

Although the witch seems well connected with the devil, the figure of the devil itself tends to be in the tradition of the folktale villain figures like the ogre.<sup>16</sup> The witch of legends shows many similarities with the demonological witch of demonologists, yet also fundamental differences. The functional classification of my paper follows the well-established classification-order of the legend editions.<sup>17</sup>

In what follows, I will present a survey of Austrian witch legends by concentrating on their essential motifs and analysing their historical, pseudo-historical or mythological background.

## LIFE AND DEEDS OF THE WITCH

### *How to Become a Witch*

Numerous accounts claim that witchcraft is a matrilineal trade passed down from mother to daughter—the daughter of a witch is born a witch.<sup>18</sup> This assumption is also reflected in the witch trials: judges would condemn children to death<sup>19</sup> alongside their mothers. It was also assumed that ungodly godparents could turn a child into a witch: During the child's baptism (which is, of course, an exorcism), the godparents had to say certain words and lines.

Witchcraft is also taught by the mother, and since each witch is bound to have trained at least one other witch by the time of her death, they turned to educating their own daughters. If the girl refuses, the mother will pursue her until she gives in. Folktales from Tyrol mention witches only passing on their gifts, chief among them stealing milk

---

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Julian Goodare, *The European Witch-Hunt* (London and New York, 2016), 133–54.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Leander Petzoldt, 'Zur Phänomenologie und Funktion der Sage: Möglichkeiten der Interpretation von Volkssagen in der Gegenwart', *Lares. Rivista trimestrale di studi demoetnoantropologici* (ed. G. B. Bronzini), LIII, 4 (1987), 455–72.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Wolfgang Behringer, *Hexen: Glaube, Verfolgung, Vermarktung* (Munich, 1998), 14; Carola Sickinger, *Sagen aus dem Schwarzwald insbesondere aus der Gegend Enz, Nagold und Würm* (Heimsheim, 1994), 36; Adalbert Depiny, *Oberösterreichisches Sagenbuch* (Linz, 1932), 162–71.

<sup>19</sup>For children as witches see Rainer Beck, *Mäuselmacher oder die Imagination des Bösen: ein Hexenprozess 1715–1723* (Munich, 2011), 339–44; Johannes Dillinger, *Kinder im Hexenprozess: Magie und Kindheit in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Stuttgart, 2011).

(*Milchdiebstahl*), to her eldest daughter.<sup>20</sup> Witches keep wooden udders in their shrines. Whenever they desire milk, they take the udders to the stables and 'milk' them while muttering the name of the farmer whose milk they want to steal. Milk starts to flow from the wooden udders just as it mysteriously disappears from the named farmer's cows. A witch will only ever share her art, especially milk stealing (*Passeier*), with her eldest daughter.<sup>21</sup>

Should the mother not be the one to teach the child, a relative is most likely to take on the role of teacher. There is an age limit on learning this trade (the child cannot be less than seven years old), and people in countries with a Protestant majority believed that the day before the child's confirmation was especially suited for the child to start learning the trade, whereas in Catholic countries like Austria it was the night before Holy Communion. However, most folktales concerning witches do not include a clear age reference. Children who have decided to learn the witch's trade must undergo a formal apprenticeship with an elderly witch. In most cases the first lesson that is taught is the creation of mice without tails—once the apprenticeship is finished, the mice will have grown tails. Most children will not enter such an apprenticeship voluntarily; this is where adult apprentices differ from children. It is said that a witch must turn away from God and everything that is holy and godly (which, in predominantly Catholic Austria, refers to saints). The witch then commences devil worship.

In the Paznaun Valley a legend reports of a couple that the wife wanted to convert her husband to devil worship, and upon formally renouncing God, she must utter certain fixed words:

'I step upon this heap of dung and renounce the Lord Jesus Christ.' But instead he said: 'I step upon this heap of dung, and will bury you in it, you being the minx that you are.'

---

<sup>20</sup>Ignaz von Zingerle, *Sagen aus Tirol* (Innsbruck, 1891), no. 748; Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus dem Burgenland*, 36–8, 45–7.

<sup>21</sup>Zingerle, *Sagen*, no. 748, 422; Leander Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus der Steiermark* (Munich, 1993), 21–2; Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus Vorarlberg*, 14–18. For milk from a dish-cloth see *ibid.*, 25; Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus Salzburg*, 174–6. The Hutterer Tötl in Hochtregist fought against weather witches: Brunner, *Steirische Sagen*, 140–76. Cf. Thompson Mot. G283 'Witches have control over weather'.

And he took the closest club, killed the witch and buried her as she was in the heap of dung.<sup>22</sup>

### *The Assembly: Witches' Ride, Flight, Dance*<sup>23</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the flight motif is surely not a unique characteristic of witch tales but a constituent of different tale types. Nevertheless, it can be considered one of the most well-known of the witch concepts. While in other tales it is just the preferred mode of transport, the flight is of great significance both in legends and in trial records. While discourses and counter-discourses on witches' flights had a prominent role among demonologists, folktales and legends linked it with several international motifs. It can be a favourite way of travelling to mountains where gatherings take place, but most interesting is the story of the beholder that nearly formed a tale type of its own.

The gathering story in Austria (and in many European countries) reads as follows. On certain nights of a ritual, witches meet to celebrate. Their congregations are held at crossroads or at remote places, in caverns beneath trees, and most especially on mountains or hills, which are frequently referred to as *Blocksb erg*. The most famous mountain is the Brocken is located in Sachsen-Anhalt. Witches from all around Germany come here for *Walpurgisnacht*.<sup>24</sup> Austria, too, has several so-called witch-mountains<sup>25</sup> (*Hexenberge*).

---

<sup>22</sup>Christian Hauser, *Sagen aus dem Paznaun und dessen Nachbarschaft* (Innsbruck, 1894) nos. 18, 28, no. 19, 28–9; Johann Nepomuk Ritter von Alpenburg, *Deutsche Alpensagen* (1861, Munich, 1977) no. 203. In the witch trial of 1662 the accused woman confessed that a man came to her and demanded she sweep the room and denounce Jesus Christ by announcing: *Ich trete auf dieses Genist/und verschwere meinen Herrn Jesum Christ* (I step on these sweepings and denounce Jesus Christ): Monika Schulz, *Magie oder die Wiederherstellung der Ordnung* (Frankfurt a. Main, 2000), 57. When a weaver comes home he observes that his wife and daughter are preparing to go out in their fine clothes. They say a spell and take out the chimney [??]. He follows them and comes to a mountain. The devil wants him to sign in his black book, he signs with God's name, and everything disappears and he stands all alone on the high mountain: Brunner, *Steirische Sagen*, no. 1, 56–7, no. 38, 78–9.

<sup>23</sup>Cf. G269.3.1. 'Witch rides man to dance', G248.1. 'Man joins feast of witches' and G247. 'Witches' dance'.

<sup>24</sup>Especially the notorious Schöckl witches' dance at Walpurgis night: Brunner, *Steirische Sagen*, no. 60, 85–6. The Schöckl weather-witch has a carriage pulled by bats: *ibid.*, 126–9, 132–4; Raimund Jäger, *Dialekt aus dem Gschnitztal: Gedichte, Hexensagen, Dorfgeschichten aus der Kriegs- und Nachkriegszeit im Trinser/Gschnitzer Dialekt* (Innsbruck, 2011), no. 138, 100–14.

<sup>25</sup>In Styria, the mountain where the gathering takes place is the Hexstein or Höchstein, in Donnersbach, the Gumpeneck, in Ennstal the Hexenturm near Admont, the Stolzalpe



Apart from the *Walpurgisnacht*, other nights are important as well, such as St. Bartholomew's Day, St. Jacob's Night, Michaelmas and New Year's Eve, as well as Christian holidays like Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. In general, congregations gather on Friday night,<sup>26</sup> but in Tyrol, they do so on Thursday night.<sup>27</sup> While witches usually attend the main feasts in human form, they change their shape for smaller local feasts.<sup>28</sup>

The journey to the congregation is—most of the time—extraordinary. In demonological discourse, the issue of flight ointment plays a rather prominent role, while in legendary tales it is just one required flight among others. Often the witches will apply a specially mixed salve<sup>29</sup> or anointing oil to either their entire body or just their legs and feet<sup>30</sup> or their face.<sup>31</sup> Then they will shed their clothes and either remain unclothed or dress festively and go on their journey. Sometimes they undertake such a journey on the proverbial broomstick, but more often on pitchforks or oven forks, logs of wood or even fragile objects like straw or butter tubs—all in all, farmer's equipment. To travel, they must

---

near Murau, also the Stangalm, Werchziralm, Schöckl, Stradner Kogel and many others: Brunner, *Steirische Sagen*, 42–4. In Vorarlberg in the Bregenzer Woods witches meet at Winterstaude: Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus Vorarlberg*, 13. In Salzburg they dance at the Tauern near Heiligenblut: id. (ed.), *Sagen aus Salzburg*, 172.

<sup>26</sup>In a Paznaun legend, a witch forbids her suitor to visit her on Friday. When he secretly visits her house, he observes that she and her daughter make the village freeze with a special liquid in a bottle. The suitor takes the bottle and empties it out in their house thus freezing the women to ice-blocks: Hauser, *Sagen*, no. 17, 22–3.

<sup>27</sup>Zingerle, *Sagen aus Tirol*, no. 723; Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus dem Burgenland*, 61–3, 67, 69.

<sup>28</sup>Depiny, *Oberösterreichisches Sagenbuch*, no. 48.

<sup>29</sup>Zingerle, *Sagen*, no. 722, 409; Will-Erich Peuckert, *Ostalpensagen* (Berlin, 1963), no. 139, 84. The Zauberer Jackl also uses an ointment: Michael Dengg, *Schilderungen und Volksbräuche, Geschichten und Sagen aus dem Lungau* (Tamsweg, 1913), 167–71; Depiny, *Oberösterreichisches Sagenbuch*, 186–7; Alpenburg, *Deutsche Alpensagen*, no. 203; L. Rapp, *Die Hexenprozesse und ihre Gegner in Tirol* (Brixen, 1891), 168; Brunner, *Steirische Sagen*, no. 30, 72–4.

<sup>30</sup>Zingerle, *Sagen*, no. 732, 414; cf. Thompson Mot. G242. 'Witch flies through air'; G242.1. 'Witch flies through air on broomstick'; G242.1.1. 'Witch smears fat on brooms in preparation for flight'; G243. 'Witch's Sabbath'.

<sup>31</sup>Brunner, *Steirische Sagen*, no. 9, 60–2.

recite a spell and leave their house via the chimney.<sup>32</sup> Stories often tell of animals which carry witches to meeting places. These animals are often black: a buck, a calf, a cat, a pig, a wolf a toad.<sup>33</sup> The more distinguished witches make use of a carriage drawn by cats.<sup>34</sup> To be able to leave without her husband or any other relative taking notice of the fact, the witch will place a broom, straw, brushwood or a log of wood, for example, in her bed and make it take her shape.<sup>35</sup>

Outsiders have the chance to spy on witches if they sit at a cross-roads<sup>36</sup> (which the witches must pass by) at night, especially if it is *Walpurgisnacht*.<sup>37</sup> This undertaking poses quite a danger to the witches' secret audience: should they be caught, the witches will punish them accordingly.<sup>38</sup> Protective circles<sup>39</sup> can be created, and farmers' instruments, for instance harrows, can be strategically placed. However, the watcher must take care to be completely covered by the harrow, for if even a small piece of his or her clothing is not covered, the witches have the chance to steal the person away forever. It is fair to conclude that the observation of the witch's journey always bears grave danger for the watcher.<sup>40</sup> The legend in the Felberau can serve as a vivid example (see **Fig. 1** for a 1925 image of witches from Felberau in a tree):

---

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., no. 1, 56–7, no. 9, 60–2, no. 34, 75; Cf. Thompson Mot. G249.3. 'Witch enters and leaves house through chimney'.

<sup>33</sup>Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus Kärnten*, 17; Depiny, *Oberösterreichisches Sagenbuch*, 162–71.

<sup>34</sup>Brunner, *Steirische Sagen*, no. 79, 96–7.

<sup>35</sup>Hans Matscher, *Der Burggräfler in Glaube und Sage* (Bolzano, 1933), 137ff; Richard Pils, *Das Waldviertel in seinen Sagen nach dem Volksmund* (Weitra, Publication P N° 1, 1995), 42.

<sup>36</sup>Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus Niederösterreich*, 43.

<sup>37</sup>Adolf Parr and Ernst Löger (eds.), *Sagen aus dem Burgenland* (Vienna and Leipzig, 1931), no. 59, cited in Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus dem Burgenland*, 134–5.

<sup>38</sup>Depiny, *Oberösterreichisches Sagenbuch*, 162–71.

<sup>39</sup>Johann Adolf Heyl, *Volksagen, Bräuche und Meinungen aus Tirol* (Brixen 1897, repr. Bozen, 1989), 530.

<sup>40</sup>It is not only witches who are reported to use a spell for transvection; the 'Saligen' also use similar verse to come to their prepared food sacrifice. Once a farmer's wife slapped the hand of a Salige when she wanted to take a bite of food, and the Salige spoke the following verse: *Auf und davon und nimmer her, Und kein reicher Locherer mehr!* (up and away and gone forever, no more wealth for the Locherer). From then on, the region of Locher became poor: Heyl, *Volksagen*, 276; cf. Zingerle, *Sagen*, no. 40.



**Fig. 1** Norbertine Bressler-Roth, 'Five witches from the Felberau in a tree'.  
 Source Josef Pöttinger, *Niederösterreichische Volkssagen* (Vienna: Österreichischer Bundesverlag, 1925), 45. [Tuczay after n. 40]

Once upon a time, a poor musician lived in Baden. His journey home from villages where he had played at dances and weddings would lead him through the great Felberau auf der Braiten. There he saw, whenever the moon was out, witches conversing beneath the great willow tree and feasting. One night, as the witches were once again dancing beneath the tree and he, consumed by fear, sought to sneak by, the sinister group suddenly came running towards him, gripped him deftly, and suddenly he, without having any knowledge of how it came to happen, was perched in the willow tree, where he was then forced to play cheery songs. In exchange, he was given fried and baked goods to his heart's desire, and the witches would play this little game with him quite often.

Once, having had quite enough, he decided he did not want to play the fiddle for the witches without any pay any longer. They, however, seemed especially friendly and each gave to him a thaler, and whatever food he could not eat right there, they cheerfully put into his bags. He rushed home from this profitable witches' dance full of joy, and when he reached for his treasures the next morning, he found in his bags shards of glass instead of coins and toads' legs and snakes' heads instead of food.

After a long time, when the musician had to pass the fateful willow tree once again, he decided not to play for these spawns of hell, because he was still sorely plagued by the trick they had played on him. But as soon as he had laid eyes on the witches, he found himself sitting in the damned tree once again and was asked to play a dancing tune, which he firmly refused. The angry witches then descended on him, almost beating him to death, and then threw him into the brook, and as he rose rather miserably from his wet resting place, the witches screamed after him that he would do well to remember not to leave the house after the evening bells, otherwise his life would be forfeit.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup>Carl Calliano, *Niederösterreichischer Sagenschatz* I (Vienna, 1924), vol. I, 26; Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus dem Burgenland*, 65–7, here a clarinet player must swear: *Wir reiten siebenmal um den Mist/und leugnen den Herrn Jesu Christ* (We ride seven times around the dung/and disavow Jesus Christ). In another variant, a violinist plays for the witches and is given food as a reward that transforms into horse dung: *ibid.*, 69; Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus der Steiermark*, 19–21; Marianne Direder-Mai and Leander Petzoldt (eds.), *Sagen aus Südtirol* (Munich, 1993), 53–5; 61–3; Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus Salzburg*, 172–3.

Besides the eavesdropping on the witches' journey, the gathering of witches<sup>42</sup> also plays an important role in Austrian legends. Eyewitness accounts are quite possibly used to stress the tales' authenticity. Many of the witnesses are tempted by their own curiosity, and some pay for their bravery and courage with their lives. The body is found the next morning: its neck is twisted and its skin damaged by claw marks. If a spectator should step into the witches' circle uninvited, he is torn apart, thrown into the fire or tortured and punished in a different way, the most harmless case of such punishment being the witches playing mean tricks on the eavesdropper. Witches will also punish those who have become involuntary witnesses to their gatherings. If the one caught red-handed should be carrying a protective spell or something of great value or should he utter a hallowed name, he will be able to escape unharmed. If not, he will be scratched with claws or forced to dance to his death. Here also we can refer to the much older tales of the Wild Hunt, where onlookers are transported to a remote place through the air, and their senses are confounded.<sup>43</sup>

The reason for the mentioned punishments may very well be the witches' understandable fear of betrayal or denunciation. It is only logical, then, that some tales report that witches made the mischievous intruder promise not to reveal their secret—and subsequently treated him well. Should he break the promise, he would be punished severely.<sup>44</sup> At times the intruder is advised to join the witches' community, so as to make sure that he will never betray them. This, however, rarely succeeds. The clever intruder might pretend to become a witch, but he writes a

---

<sup>42</sup>Not all elements of the so-called Sabbath appear in the legends. As folklorists have observed, the legends more often portray a rural feast with food and dances than a sinister ritual scene: Emma Wilby, 'Burchard's *strigae*, the Witches' Sabbath, and Shamanistic Cannibalism in Early Modern Europe', *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*, 8 (2013), 18–49. James Brent Musgrave, 'The Witches' Sabbat in Legend and Literature', *Lore and Language* 17 (1999), 157–74.

<sup>43</sup>Cf. Claude Lecouteux, *The Wild Hunt and the Ghostly Processions of the Undead* (Rochester, Vermont, 2011), 12–14.

<sup>44</sup>Franz Xaver Kießling (ed.), *Frau Saga im niederösterreichischen Waldviertel. Eine Sammlung von Märchen, Sagen und Erzählungen* (Vienna, 1925), 335; Anton Mailly (ed.), *Niederösterreichische Sagen* (Leipzig, 1926), 136.

hallowed name in the book<sup>45</sup> using his blood as ink or thrice makes the sign of the cross. This act is crowned with immediate success: the witches will disappear. Christian names and symbols are endowed with the greatest protective power; the sign of the cross is of special importance. The meals served at such gatherings have one very characteristic fault: they are prepared without salt and no bread is served. Both items are repellent to witches, and at times the mere mention of these foods will make the witches' congregation dissolve.

The witches' gatherings are heady festivities with lots of dancing, and, as we noticed with the previously related folk legend, music is a must, too. Oftentimes the devil himself will appear as a musician, but a human one is just as welcome. Once the next day dawns, he is rewarded and paid in gold, which, however, will turn into unpleasant objects like horse droppings later on.

The protocols of the witch trials make frequent mention of orgies being celebrated with the devil (where the witch places a kiss on the devil's buttocks, for example). In folk legends, such a thing is rarely if ever mentioned. The witches' deeds during such gatherings change, too: While isolated tales make mention of witches plotting atrocities,<sup>46</sup> one may conclude that in general their meetings are hardly worth all the fuss being made about them since they are simply chances for people to enjoy themselves, eat, drink, dance and do everything their hard day-to-day lives do not give them the chance to do.

Should the witness remain unnoticed, he will, like Lucius in the *Golden Ass*, attempt to fly like a witch himself—and will, like Lucius, be confronted with a few nasty surprises. The watchers don't know what to do with the witches' salve, and they will also fail at carrying out the

---

<sup>45</sup>In many Austrian legends sorcerers and witches demand on their deathbed that their grimoires be destroyed or they will either not be able to die or will face a violent death: Direder-Mai and Petzoldt (eds.), *Sagen aus Südtirol*, 23–4; Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus Niederösterreich*, 41–2. Grimoires are also understood as being a pact with the devil: Christian Falkner, 'Sagen aus dem Ötztal: Ötztaler Buch', *Schlern-Schriften* 229 (Innsbruck, 1963), 124–6; Depiny, *Oberösterreichisches Sagenbuch*, 198–208, 218–22; Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus Niederösterreich*, 41–2; Brunner, *Steirische Sagen*, 99–106. The witch has to carry her black book always with her. Before she dies she must choose a successor to give her the book: Leander Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen, Märchen und Schwänke aus Südtirol: Bozen, Vinschgau und Etschtal* (Innsbruck, 2002), 324–6.

<sup>46</sup>Leander Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus Tirol* (Munich, 1992), 22–3.

second part—the spell which must be recited without failure and without any mistakes upon taking to the air. Even a slight twist on the words will make the whole experience inevitably end in tragedy for the curious imitator.<sup>47</sup>

Should an eavesdropper be clever enough not to make any mistakes before arriving at the place of the festivities, he must again follow several important rules. He must remain quiet, not utter a sound of disgust or admiration, and not, under any circumstances, pronounce a hallowed name. Should he do so involuntarily, the spell will be broken, and he will be alone at the top of a mountain and have to find his way back on his own.<sup>48</sup> This could mean that he must walk a long way, or, if the gathering takes place in a wine cellar, he must find his way out of the cellar he had been locked in. Should the witches decide to provide him with an animal to ride home on, he is not allowed to speak during the entire journey. This is a condition the witches impose on the watcher because they know he will fail. Oftentimes the fast pace of the journey will scare him—and make him call upon God. He will fall from the sky immediately. The site of his crash will rarely be close to his home.

Tales from Tyrol<sup>49</sup> mention that a witch changed a man from the village into an ass because he dared to reveal the witches' secret to a companion.

### The Ass

Once upon a time, the Sternwirth in Merano employed a manservant who was able to tell witches apart from other human beings. One morning, this manservant stood upon the doorstep conversing with a traveller from the Passeier Valley, and as the villagers made their way home from the Rorate mass, he pointed out several witches among them to the traveller. As he himself was travelling beyond the walls a few days later, he was seen by a witch with a taste for revenge—and turned into an ass. He returned to the Sternwirth as he was, but was promptly chased away. Home- and masterless he roamed the Sandplatz and grazed there until the English miller took pity on the lost animal and took it in. The bewitched manservant had to perform all the duties of a miller's donkey and in turn was given straw and beatings. This went on for quite a while. One day he had to take the

---

<sup>47</sup> Zingerle, *Sagen*, no. 753, 717.

<sup>48</sup> Georg Graber (ed.), *Sagen aus Kärnten* (Graz, 1944), 306.

<sup>49</sup> Zingerle, *Sagen*, no. 756.

flour bags out beyond the walls, and the very same witch who had cursed<sup>50</sup> him stood there chattering with another. As she laid eyes on the donkey she said to her friend: 'Look there—I let this fool have it. Because he was cheeky, he now is an ass.'

'And he must stay one forever?' the second woman asked.

'Yes', replied the first. "If he only knew, he could help himself quite easily. All he has to do is catch a hallowed wreath on Corpus Christi and eat it, and all my powers would be to no avail.'

The donkey had been listening keenly and heard their entire conversation. As the procession was held the next Corpus Christi, he managed to flee from his stable and snatch a candle and a wreath from its bearer and to eat the wreath. As soon as he had achieved this, the spell was lifted and the lost manservant was returned to his human form. The witch was arrested and was burned on the Sinig. (Merano)<sup>51</sup>

There are, however, certain clusters of folktales which make mention of the witch herself taking a companion with her on her journey. Usually it is her lover who discovers the secret by accident and subsequently wants to learn what happens at the gatherings. Here, too, the journey to the gathering seldom has a happy ending. Another reason for taking along a companion is the hope of making the person one of them. It is, as mentioned earlier, a witch's duty to make sure the guild grows in numbers. This is, however, an aspiration which hardly ever comes to pass in folktales. While the desire for riches and a comfortable life might seem alluring, most aspirants ultimately do not take the final step—unless they are forced to do so.

### *Shape Shifting*

One of the essential gifts the witch acquires as a follower of Satan is the ability to change shape. Often, she will acquire the gift of turning into an animal; as for which animal she turns into, there are numerous

---

<sup>50</sup>Cf. Thompson Mot. G265.9. 'Witches ruin crops'. See the curse of the Kohlrachin who cursed the land before she was executed and beetles and worms destroyed the crops: Graber, *Sagen*, 182.

<sup>51</sup>Zingerle, *Sagen*, no. 756, 427.



possibilities. Only animals like the lamb or the dove,<sup>52</sup> which are rich in Christian symbolism, are not mentioned in this context. The witch's favoured animal is the cat.<sup>53</sup> That this animal has been declared the 'witch's animal' is unsurprising since its nocturnal way of living makes it easy to make this connection. These 'false' cats can be identified using certain signs—they have either very long or very thick tails. In the folktales from the Alps it is often said that old witches turn into black cats and remain in this shape.<sup>54</sup> The owners of the animals will know nothing of this until they, once again by accident, stumble upon a congregation of cats and discover their own amongst them.<sup>55</sup>

If the cat notices that her secret has been discovered, she will not remain with her owners but will disappear forever—but not without leaving behind an evil memento. Tales of congregations of cats are, however, small in numbers. These witch-cats cannot be killed with regular bullets. Should one attempt this, the shooter himself may be hit by the bullet.

The functions and purposes of shape-shifting are numerous. The cat, for example, will be given milk, bacon and many other food items during the day. Should the witch be the farmer's wife, her shape-shifting may have the purpose and benefit of enabling her to monitor the servants: in the shape of a cat she can easily discover lazy or thieving staff. As a cat, she can also uncover secret or illicit love relationships.

A witch may also choose the shape of a hare,<sup>56</sup> which is far less menacing. These witch-rabbits are easy to make out as they have only three legs.

---

<sup>52</sup>In a south Tyrolian legend, a woman called Bachlhenerl could change into a hen. When the hen went into a certain kitchen, they put it in the stove and thought they had burnt it. But the witch was not dead and had only burnt her face: Direder-Mai and Petzoldt (eds.), *Sagen aus Südtirol*, 53, 63–4; Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus Vorarlberg*, 23; cf. Thompson Mot. G263.1. 'Witch transforms person to animal'; Baughman Mot. D655.2. 'Witch transforms herself to animal to suck on cow'.

<sup>53</sup>In the Burgenlandian legends the witches are death-bound when they are discovered in their cat metamorphosis: Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus dem Burgenland*, 43–5. Cf. witch in cat form scares even strong young man, *ibid.*, 39–40; Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus Vorarlberg*, 23–5.

<sup>54</sup>Theodor Vernaleken (ed.), *Alpensagen. Volksüberlieferungen aus der Schweiz, aus Vorarlberg, Kärnten, Steiermark, Salzburg, Ober- und Niederösterreich* (Graz, 1993), 108.

<sup>55</sup>Zingerle, *Sagen*, no. 739.

<sup>56</sup>Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus dem Burgenland*, 43–4. Cf. Thompson Mot. G210. 'Form of witch' and the subcategories, for example G211.2.7. 'Witch in form of a hare'.

Here, too, the folktales make mention of gatherings of hares. These animals, however, are far more likely to be encountered on their own. The witch uses this shape for a similar purpose: She steals food, spies on servants and other villagers and, motivated by jealousy, on her husband or lover. As a hare, the witch's main enemy is the hunter. He is her preferred victim when it comes to playing tricks. When he shoots at her, she will not move a hair and will then, once he has fired, disappear into a house. Should the hunter follow her, he will find the mistress of the house at the table, drenched in sweat. The hunter can prepare himself for encounters with these very special hares by loading his gun with a penny of St. Matthew, a thaler of St. Mary or a silver bullet. Throwing a rosary at the animal is also quite useful.

Another so-called witch's animal is the toad.<sup>57</sup> If this animal is harmed, the injuries can be observed on a witch's body.<sup>58</sup> The fox, too, is an animal often associated with witches; it is the shape assumed when cattle is harmed.

Tales that mix together tales of werewolves<sup>59</sup> and those of witches are worth special mention. While werewolves certainly have their own set of complex ideas and tales, tales of witches and tales of werewolves have been blended over time. Once in the shape of a werewolf, a witch will do great harm to herds of cattle, will steal and murder, even harm humans. The transformation happens once the witch puts on a ring, bracelet or belt made of either human skin or a wolf's pelt.

### *The So-called Weather Witch*

People were especially afraid of witches inferring things from the weather because this act could be particularly harmful. If a farmer out in the fields suddenly confronted a whirlwind or bales of hay suddenly rising into the air, this was usually a witch's doing.<sup>60</sup> These whirlwinds caused by witches are mostly harmless (although terrifying), but they have the

---

<sup>57</sup>Cf. Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus dem Burgenland*, 38–9. The Hutterer Tötl in Hochtregist fought against weather witches: Brunner, *Steirische Sagen*, no. 157, 136–7, 138–9.

<sup>58</sup>Vernaleken, *Alpensagen*, 106b; Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus dem Burgenland*, 31–2, 35–7.

<sup>59</sup>Cf. Willem de Blécourt (ed.), *Werewolf Histories* (Basingstoke, 2015).

<sup>60</sup>Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus dem Burgenland*, 61, 69–70; Brunner, *Steirische Sagen*, 110–16.

potential to grow into dangerous tempests. For protection, one must throw either a left shoe or a sacred object into the gale. This will immediately reveal the witch. Folktales also mention how witches create those fateful clouds.<sup>61</sup> They whip the water from brooks using a switch taken from a hazel tree, stir wells with a staff, throw a handful of water in the air, dig a hole in the ground into which they then urinate, make signs of magic, or take a sieve and place a cat's head, a crab and rotten eggs in it and say a spell over it. They might also place pebbles in a jar and shake it, hatch eggs or simply comb their hair. Consecrated bells<sup>62</sup> will, especially in the countries surrounding the Alps, put an end to the bad weather and stop avalanches or landslides caused by witches and therefore also serve as a way to distinguish so-called normal rain from a witch's spell. An example of this kind of story is the bell called Marlingerin:

It is said that witches and even the devil himself feared the big church bell in the parish of Marling (which can be found just an hour outside of Merano on the right-hand bank of the Etsch). It was called 'Marlingerin', and whenever it was heard during especially bad weather, no one but the devil's kin was afraid. The bell was engraved with the following words:

Anna Maria hoß ich,	(My name is Anna Maria)
Alle Wetter verstoß ich,	(I repel all kinds of weather)
Alle Wetter vertreib ich,	(I chase away all kinds of weather)
In Marling, da verbleib ich.	(I will forever remain in Marling.)

It cracked many years ago and had to be cast anew; the bell founder, however, forgot the old inscription and with it the bell's powers and all the trust that had been placed in it was lost forever.<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup>Direder-Mai and Petzoldt (eds.), *Sagen aus Südtirol*, 70–2.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid. The weather witch of Mariastein who slept in the chapel was disturbed by pilgrims. In a dispute, she called them superstitious. They took revenge by accusing her of being a witch and she was hanged. Later, many people reported that they saw her ghost: Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus Tirol*, 28–31. After the death of two witches of the Cava Valley near St Gallenkirch in Vorarlberg their house became haunted: id. (ed.), *Sagen aus Vorarlberg*, 29–32; Hauser, *Sagen*, no. 20, 30–3; Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus Salzburg*, 174–6. Bells at Salzburgian church at Muhr and Kaprun are called witches' bells: ibid., 178–9; Jäger, *Dialekt*, 80–99.

<sup>63</sup>In Matscher's collection, several other bells are mentioned as a defence against witches: Matscher, *Burggräfler*, 188ff.

It is said that once two of the womenfolk went down to the Valsertal. They had been visiting a number of specific places on the mountain. A man who did not trust these women went to St Jodok and asked for the weather bells to be rung. The two women then had to leave without having done their evil deeds. They said: 'If not for the Joaser Schellen [the weather bells], we would have flooded the Valsertal by now.'

Another time the curate, Mr Jörgele, saw two strange women coming towards him from Widum. Since Mr Jörgele was a particularly pious priest who had the ability to see more than ordinary folk did, he knew well that these two women were up to no good. So he ran as fast as he could towards the valley to reach it before the women did. At the point where the railway curves today, a bridge used to connect one part of the valley to the other. It was there that he confronted the two women and forced them to turn back. But later, they would say: 'If not for the black one, we would have flooded the valley by now.'

### *The Maleficium*

Both witches who take the form of an animal and weather-witches attack not only cattle<sup>64</sup> but humans, too. The associated curse will result in consumption, extreme weight loss, St Vitus' dance (Huntington's Chorea), ulcers and, of course the *Hexenschuss*, lumbago. Often it is children,<sup>65</sup> particularly unbaptised ones, who fall victim to witches' evil magic. For protection, a Bible or a lug wrench (which, naturally, takes the shape of a cross) were placed beneath children's pillows; small pieces of paper with prayers written on them were quite popular as well. A sure sign of enchantment are never-ending screams; therefore, another word for a special kind of bewitchment is *Beschreien*. A witch will get close to a child, often while it is being nursed, and praise the mother's abundant milk. The child will soon refuse to be nursed. For this reason, children

---

<sup>64</sup>Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus Vorarlberg*, 26–8. The witches harm the cattle with morning dew they have collected by brushing it off the meadows: Depiny, *Oberösterreichisches Sagenbuch*, 162–71.

<sup>65</sup>Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus dem Burgenland*, 58; Direder-Mai and Petzoldt (eds.), *Sagen aus Südtirol*, 51.

who have not yet been baptised are usually kept away from strangers. This spell requires bodily contact.

On 27 September 1583, seventy-year-old Maria Pleinacher from Mank in Lower Austria was dragged from the city of Vienna to the Gänseweide (today's Weißgerberlande by the Franzensbrücke Bridge) and, once there, was burned to death under the watchful eyes of the bishop of Vienna, all required judicial staff, other honourable officials, and a large and fascinated crowd. She was charged with the following crimes (she finally 'confessed' to the following repeated acts of gruesome torture): murdering her husband and several of her children (by magic), being in league with the devil and having lain with him, participating in witch dances (on the Ötscher), performing weather magic, and desecrating altar bread. The most severe charge, however, was her supposedly having bewitched her then sixteen-year-old granddaughter Anna Schlutterbauer,<sup>66</sup> who had been raised by her grandmother after her mother's death and who had for many years been suffering from seizures (most likely psychological in origin). She was subsequently healed on Ascension Day in 1593 by means of an exorcism (which was of course used as propaganda against the accused).

Villagers worked counter-magic if they suspected witchcraft. Specialists like witch banishers were alerted to ward off witches' evil influence and magic. In some places where a whole settlement of witches threatened villagers, they often brought in somebody from outside, as the following example from Carinthia illustrates.<sup>67</sup>

In the mountains, just beyond Eisentratten, the farmer Gautschenbacher used to dwell. At the same time an old woman lived in the nearby town of Gmünd. She possessed powers to do harm to others, so people feared and avoided her. The farmer knew nothing of the old woman's magic. Once, the old crone dropped an object on the ground in front of the farmer: he picked it up and was suddenly struck by severe pain in one knee. He made his way home with great difficulty and had to stay in bed, and no

---

<sup>66</sup>Anna Schlutterbauer was an epileptic, and her case clearly shows the conflict between Catholics and Protestants. Her father had her exorcised without success by the local priests, but then the Bishop of Vienna exorcised her of a great many devils: Wilhelm Gottlieb Soldan, *Geschichte der Hexenprozesse* 1 (repr. Bremen, 2011), 493; Gary K. Waite, *Eradicating the Devil's Minions: Anabaptists and Witches in Reformation Europe, 1525–1600* (Toronto, 2007), 186–7.

<sup>67</sup>Depiny, *Oberösterreichisches Sagenbuch*, 180–4.

one knew how to bring him relief. Then he remembered a man who lived in Feldkirchen and owned a *Bergspiegel* (mountain mirror). His name was Schnabel. The farmer called for him and received partial relief: he now could at least leave his bed. This was all Schnabel could do for him because he had no further control over the evil spirit.<sup>68</sup>

Whatever one may find on one's doorstep one should never take into the home; oftentimes a witch will place it there as bait and use the object to gain control over the person once the object has been picked up and carried over the threshold.<sup>69</sup> Again, children are the preferred victims. This is also related to changelings being placed in a cradle. Witches can send diseases to animals and villagers alike. They have snakes, maggots or worms invade villagers' houses and food.<sup>70</sup>

That witches find lost objects or even animals is rarely a subject of legends. In a Cainthian legend of the witch in the Loibl<sup>71</sup> Valley, an old woman possessed by the devil was able to find objects or cattle, and a peasant who had lost two oxen asked her about them. She told him to come back the next day. When he hid near her house, he observed a black figure that had obviously come to inform her about the lost oxen. Because he knew it was the devil, he never dared come back. This obviously social aspect of the village diviner is suppressed by her relation to the devil and therefore stigmatised as evil.

### *The Witch as Alp or Trud or Drud*

An exceptional position is held by legends dealing with an Alp or Trud,<sup>72</sup> who rides or presses villagers in their sleep.<sup>73</sup> The so-called fidler Hans once said: 'If there is a Trud, then I do not fear her.' The Trud came to

---

<sup>68</sup>Graber, *Sagen*, 183–4.

<sup>69</sup>A motif that has been picked up prominently in the vampire novel *Let the Right One In* by John Ajvide Lindqvist.

<sup>70</sup>The Hutterer Tözl in Hochtregist fought against weather witches: Brunner, *Steirische Sagen*, no. 157, 136–7.

<sup>71</sup>Graber, *Sagen aus Kärnten*, 180.

<sup>72</sup>Willem de Blécourt, 'Night Elves: mistresses of the night, good beings and an innumerable multitude of women' in id. (ed.), *Origins of the Witches' Sabbath* (in preparation) will deal with the proto-Sabbath myths.

<sup>73</sup>Cf. Claude Lecouteux, 'Der Schrat', in *Eine Welt*, 55–74, esp. 62–3; Christa Agnes Tuczay, 'Alb – Buhlteufel – Vampirin und die Geschlechter- und Traumtheorien des 19.

his house; he could hear her come in through the window. She held him tight until he could move no more. It is said that she whispered something to him as well, but whatever it was, he took it to the grave with him.

This relates to the cluster of folktales regarding the witch's journey in which the witch rides a human<sup>74</sup>; the witch in these tales takes the shape of a Drud or a Trud<sup>75</sup> or a Mare, an Alp, or the Austrian-Vorarlbergian variant or ecotype of the Schrätel,<sup>76</sup> a goblin of the woods. A magical bridle is used, and the human is turned into a horse. If he succeeds in throwing off his rider, he regains his human shape, and if he manages to throw the bridle over her, the witch herself is turned into a horse. The farm hand, or whoever it was the witch had chosen as her mount, takes the horse to the smith and has the animal shod.<sup>77</sup> The next day the farmer's wife will be lying in bed severely ill, bearing horseshoes on her hands and feet. Tales like these are widespread in Austria and Germany; moreover, a blending of witch tales and tales of the Trud is evident.

It is said that a Trud held Micheler under close watch in his old house. He promised her something if she would only leave him be. The next day an old woman well known to him came to visit. He did not give her anything, for he did not think badly of her. After having waited for a while, she said: 'Since you will not give me anything, I have to take my leave.' It was then that he knew who the Trud was.<sup>78</sup>

---

Jahrhunderts' in Christoph Augustynowicz and Ursula Reber (eds.), *Vampirismus und magia posthuma im Diskurs der Habsburgermonarchie* (Vienna, 2011), 199–222. Cf. Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus dem Burgenland*, 32–4, 53–5; id. (ed.), *Sagen aus Salzburg*, 180–1; Ernst Lasnik (ed.), *Von der Trude, der Wilden Jagd und Geschäften mit dem Teufel. Geschichten und Sagen aus der Weststeiermark* (Graz, 1996).

<sup>74</sup>The witch transforms the farm-hand into a horse and rides to the place where the witches dance. There he destroys the bridle, regains his human form and throws the saddle and bridle onto the witch and has her shod; Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus Vorarlberg* 18–20; id. (ed.), *Sagen aus Kärnten*, 13.

<sup>75</sup>Id. (ed.), *Sagen aus dem Burgenland*, 46–7; id. (ed.), *Sagen aus der Steiermark*, 23–5.

<sup>76</sup>Cf. Richard Beitzl, *Im Sagenwald: Neue Sagen aus Vorarlberg* (Feldkirch, 1953), 366.

<sup>77</sup>Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus der Steiermark*, 18–19. Cf. Baughman Mot. G211.1.1.2. 'Witch as horse shod with horseshoes' and Mot. G211.1.1.2(a) 'Witch rides man after transforming him into a horse with a magic bridle'. He manages to get the bridle on her, rides her all night over rough country, has her shod. The shoes are still on her feet (or wounds from nails) when she changes back to her usual form.

<sup>78</sup>Heinrich Fidler (ed.) 'Heimatsagen aus Vals', *Tiroler Heimatblätter*, 7/9 (1967), 82–3, here 82.

### *The End of the Witch*

The motif of the gruesome death<sup>79</sup> of an evil person can also be found in folktales of the witch. Village witches are not always outsiders, sometimes they are ordinary members of the community with husbands, children, relatives and acquaintances who are not always informed about their wrongdoings. It is often only when the witch meets her end (in nearly all cases a terrible one at the hands of the devil) that the husband is aware that he had been married to a witch. In Upper Austria, a farmer's wife had bewitched her son's cattle. When she was condemned to die, her husband wanted her to have the last sacraments, but the village priest said that she had already found her own way. A farmer in Oberpuch had unwittingly married a witch, and one night he found a broom in his bed: the devil had thrown the witch down a well,<sup>80</sup> where she could be heard screaming and wailing at night. A brave knight exhumed her corpse, which had been buried outside the cemetery, but the devil always dug it up. So they buried it in a swamp, but she haunted the area. Often the devil punishes a witch's body by tearing it into tiny pieces. Or the witch lives unrecognised her entire life in the community, and only when her end is near does she try to save herself. In one variant, she asks a hunter for 3 twenty-schilling bills but does not say why she wants the money, so he refuses to give it to her. When the devil hunts her down, it is said that the money would have saved her. In a village near Engelharszell, an unrecognised witch died, and after her death a black cat with horseshoes sat on her corpse: the devil.

Male and female witches who had a pact with the devil are also the subject of curious incidents when they die. At their funeral, horses cannot not pull the wagon carrying them until the minister says his prayers. Often this happens at the cross-roads where the witch had summoned the devil. Chapels are also places horses refuse to pass, so they have to

---

<sup>79</sup>In a Burgenlandian variant the village witch curses seven brides, making them barren. Although she goes on a pilgrimage to Rome, the pope punishes her because of the great evil she has done to the villagers: Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus dem Burgenland*, 42–3. Cf. Thompson Mot. G278. 'Death of witch'.

<sup>80</sup>A peasant woman of Hörsching, near Linz in Upper Austria, baked wonderful Bavarian doughnuts because of her pact with the devil. Whenever she wanted some, she called out 'Wuli! Wuli! Wuli!' and toads came out of the stove spewing lard into her pots. At the end of her life the devil drowned her in a pond: Depiny, *Oberösterreichisches Sagenbuch*, no. 81, 173.



bypass them. In Kefermarkt, a witch appeared as a ghost demanding that the minister bury her in the Weinberger Moos. When he gave in, eleven horses were needed to carry her corpse there.<sup>81</sup>

The motif of the evil death of the great sinner—and if anyone is a great sinner it is somebody who has an agreement with the devil—can be traced back to medieval times. Caesarius of Heisterbach gives an example of the evil death of a gambling knight to inform posterity of the devil's treachery.<sup>82</sup> The devil has the function of God's executioner. Caesarius emphasises that by God's fiat, the devil approaches the knight and takes him over the roof where his entrails get stuck in the roof tiles. As his body is nowhere to be found, his entrails are buried instead. The story's moral: Although the devil grants his followers prosperity, at the end they are always cheated.<sup>83</sup>

An evil death has the character of a warning for marginalised groups, but especially those in league with the devil. Beneath the gentry such as nobles and clerics, all marginalised groups are predestined for an evil death. In the prototypical medieval story that serves as a precursor to the well-known Faust narrative, Theophilus can only avoid his evil death because he has not renounced Mary, who even takes his contract with the devil out of hell.

### TRACES OF ANCIENT OR SHAMANISTIC MATERIALS

As the most ancient layer of the legend corpus, Röhrich mentions the legend of the resurrection of bones.<sup>84</sup> The oldest record is the story of Thor and his rams. In the alpine legend tradition, the motif is evident in several different demonological legends, for example as a meal of ghosts where a cow is slaughtered and a shepherd who witnesses the act shares their meal. Afterwards the ghosts put together the bones on the cow hide. On the following morning, the cow has returned to life, but the

---

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., no. 162, 184–6.

<sup>82</sup>82 Caesarius von Heisterbach, *Dialogus Miraculorum – Dialog über die Wunder*, ed. Nikolaus Nösges and Horst Schneider, 5 vols., vol. V (Brepols, 2009), 34, 119.

<sup>83</sup>Cf. Christa Agnes Tuczay, 'Die Kunst des Sterbens: vom guten und schlimmen Tod im Mittelalter', in id. (ed.), *Jenseits: eine mittelalterliche und mediävistische Imagination: Interdisziplinäre Ansätze zur Analyse des Unerklärlichen* (Frankfurt a. M., 2016), 41–55.

<sup>84</sup>Lutz Röhrich, *Sage* (Stuttgart, 1966), 46–9.

piece the herdsman ate is missing. The story demonstrates its livestock-peasant background. The same legend is also recorded as a tale of huntsmen, in which the demons involved are easily identified as the famous lords of the animals. Often it is the wild hunt or figures of the wild hunt who perform the resuscitation. In the hunting version the alpine legends preserve the ancient representation of the motif compared to the North German Thor ram story, which is set in a rural peasant context.<sup>85</sup>

The hunting culture was identified in Mircea Eliade's ground-breaking study, and many scholars began to track down evidence in the anthropological and historical literature supporting the thesis that traces of shamanism are to be found in several archaic legends; they also argued that historical European-style witchcraft might have included a form of shamanism.<sup>86</sup> There are essentially two lines of argument here: one, espoused by Éva Pócs<sup>87</sup> and Carlo Ginzburg<sup>88</sup> and their followers, connects ancient,<sup>89</sup> medieval and early modern practices to pre-Christian religious beliefs, mostly in eastern Europe, where conversion happened later and the lines of connection are easier to trace (but with implications for other regions). The second, presented by Claude Lecouteux in his book *Witches, Werewolves, and Fairies*,<sup>90</sup> compares accounts of supernatural experiences during the medieval period (including transcripts from witchcraft and werewolf trials) in Germany to the relatively undisturbed shamanic practices further north.

---

<sup>85</sup>Cf. Leopold Schmidt, 'Pelops und die Haselhexe', in *Laos* I (Stockholm, 1951), 67–78, here 67; Kevin Tuite, 'Pelops, the Hazel-Witch and the Pre-Eaten Ibex: on an ancient circumponitic symbolic cluster', in *Monographies en archéologie et histoire classiques de l'Université McGill. Antiquitates Proponticae, Circumponticae et Caucasicæ* II (Amsterdam: 1997), 11–28.

<sup>86</sup>Christa Agnes Tuczay, *Der Unhold ohne Seele* (Vienna, 1982), 115–28.

<sup>87</sup>Éva Pócs, *Between the Living and the Dead: A perspective on witches and seers in the early modern age* (Budapest, 1999), 73–107.

<sup>88</sup>Carlo Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Baltimore, 1983); id, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath* (Chicago, 1991); Ronald Hutton, *Shamans. Siberian Spirituality and the Western Imagination* (London, 2001).

<sup>89</sup>Georg Luck, *Arcana Mundi: Magic and the Occult in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A Collection of Ancient Texts* (Baltimore, 1985), 79–84.

<sup>90</sup>Claude Lecouteux, *Witches, Werewolves, and Fairies: Shapeshifters and Astral Doubles in the Middle Ages* (Rochester, 2003), 147–8.

Traces of so-called shamanic motifs can be found predominantly in tales from Burgenland, since they are influenced by Hungarian folk culture. In those tales, witches tear apart one of their own, who then comes back to life. The legends around the so-called hazel-witch<sup>91</sup> have been analysed by the well-known Austrian folklorist Leopold Schmidt.<sup>92</sup> In short, the legend tells of a farm-hand who comes to know that every Thursday evening, the farmer's wife goes to her kitchen, placing herself under the chimney hole. Then she anoints herself while murmuring a spell<sup>93</sup> and removes her own entrails. Afterwards she disappears up the chimney on a broom. When she comes back, she puts the entrails back in her body and is as healthy as ever. One Thursday the farm-hand goes to see the entrails and cuts them with his knife. On the following day, the farmer's wife lies dead in her bed, and only the farm-hand knows what happened.<sup>94</sup>

In the legend of the hazel-witch the clandestine spectator or observer is a farm-hand from Seis who follows the farm-girl on horseback. He comes to the Schlern, a famous witches' mountain. After the dance the farm-girl is butchered, fried and eaten. The farm-hand gets a fried rib but does not eat it; he just puts it in his pocket. Afterwards the witches pull together the bones and bring the girl back to life, but instead of the missing rib, they substitute a piece of hazel wood. Then they say that if someone calls the girl hazel-witch, she will die. On the next day, the farm-hand reveals the girl's secret and she drops dead.<sup>95</sup> The German legends of the brothers Grimm only know the motif from a Christian variant of the drowned child, whose bones are collected by the child's

---

<sup>91</sup> Zingerle, *Sagen*, no. 805, 470; Heyl, *Volkssagen*, 435.

<sup>92</sup> Schmidt, 'Pelops'.

<sup>93</sup> In the South Tyrolian variant, the farm-hand gets the charm *Auf und davon und ninderst an* (up and away and nowhere against) wrong, thus saying, 'Auf und davon und überall an' (Up and away and everywhere against): Direder-Mai and Petzoldt (eds.), *Sagen aus Südtirol*, 53. In a Salzburgian variant she says, 'Grechen auf und nirgends an' (straight-forward and nowhere against), while the farm hand who has observed the anointing of the witches says, 'Grechen auf und überall an' (straightforward and everywhere against): Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus Salzburg*, 172.

<sup>94</sup> Zingerle, *Sagen*, no. 722, 409.

<sup>95</sup> Heyl, *Volkssagen*, no. 125, 435ff. and no. 151, 676; Zingerle, *Sagen*, no. 804, 469; Johann Bunker, *Schwänke, Sagen und Märchen in beanzischer Mundart* (Leipzig, 1906), no. 79: here the rib is from elder-wood.

mother, who carries it to the church: The child comes back to life.<sup>96</sup> The Christian context classifies the resurrection as a Christian miracle, while in the culture of the North Asiatic hunting peoples, this would have been imagined as a resuscitation ritual.

## FAMOUS TALES RELATED TO WITCH TRIALS AND HISTORIC TALES OF WITCHES

The Zaubererjackl trial<sup>97</sup> (1675–90) in Salzburg concerned, not a witch, but a sorcerer and was one of the last major trials in the Holy Roman Empire. Jack or Jackl was the most notorious sorcerer in Salzburg in the seventeenth century, well known because of his magic, and rumours about him and his deeds began during his lifetime. Many claimed to have seen him cut off from a piece of wood shavings that immediately turned into mice. Hence, he was given the name *Mäusemacher*—mouse maker.<sup>98</sup> He also knew how to prepare salves, which he would use to turn himself into a wolf for twenty-four hours. He was in league with many other sorcerers and witches in the country, and he commanded them all. One could join his coven at night during gatherings of sorcerers and witches on the Speiereck, where witch dances and other hellish revelries were held. Joining required a special ceremony; in imitation of the Christian ritual, it took the form of a baptism. An applicant to the coven had the old Christian baptism scraped (*abgeripelt* or *abgekratzzt*)

<sup>96</sup>Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (eds.), *Deutsche Sagen*, (Hildesheim, 2006), no. 62.

<sup>97</sup>See Heinz Nagl, 'Der Zauberer-Jackl Prozess – Hexenprozesse im Erzstift Salzburg 1676–1690', *Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für Salzburger Landeskunde*, 112/13 (1972/3), 385–539 and *ibid.*, 114 (1974), 79–241; Norbert Schindler, *Rebellion, Community and Custom* (Cambridge, 2002); Michael Dengg (ed.), *Lungauer Volksleben. Schilderungen und Volksbräuche, Geschichten und Sagen aus dem Lungau* (Tamsweg, 1913; revised by Josef Brettenthaler, Salzburg, 1957), 167–74.

<sup>98</sup>In a Tyrolean variant, a church minister had large old books partly chained. One time the maid, when alone, opened one of the books and read it; suddenly, the whole room was full of mice. When the maid screamed in fear the cleric came running and read the book backwards, whereupon the mice were gone: Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus Tirol*, 27. For mice-making in witch trials cf. Rainer Beck, *Mäuselmacher oder die Imagination des Bösen: ein Hexenprozess 1715–1723* (München, 2011), *passim*.

from his forehead and was given a new name, often that of an animal such as *Kräratz*, *Hirschenhorn*, *Kröte* or *Hasenfuß*.<sup>99</sup>

According to legend, the Salzburgian Staudinger witch had been apprenticed to Jackl. He visited her quite often and taught her the black arts. She was well known to all practitioners of magic throughout the country and gathered with them at the Speiereck. Her mother once asked her whether the rumours were true that she had become a witch. She answered that while her mother was cooking mush she could ride on her broom to Salzburg and be back before the mush was cooked. She anointed an old broomstick, demonstrating her art to her mother. She was later accused of sorcery and burnt.<sup>100</sup>

A peasant woman, Magdalena Grillenberger, nicknamed Wagenlehnerin, had been denounced by her granddaughter, who had been accused of arson. This was the last witch trial in Mühlviertel.<sup>101</sup> The legend described the witch as being part of a clan with her family. At the age of twelve, her daughter stole a large quantity of milk from a cow. On Christmas Eve, the witch wedded the devil near Zell near the Ofnerkreuz and came back with her daughters at two o'clock in the morning. She told her husband that she had attended Christmas Eve Midnight Mass. One night the witch rode on her broom through the chimney to St Stephen's in Vienna. She and her daughters were burned at the stake. Once in the fire, she called to the devil that he should shoot her, but he refused, replying that he had no gunpowder.<sup>102</sup>

## CONCLUSION

A comparison of just the motifs reveals a similarity of Austrian witch legends to the legends of Germany or other European countries. What makes it nevertheless remarkable are the Alpine relations between the older mythological figures and the witch figure on the one hand and

---

<sup>99</sup>Jackl had a special interest in young people such as boys working as shepherds. He chose them to teach them his magic. Around 1678 no less than 114 magicians and witches between the ages of 11 and 20 were executed in Salzburg. Most of them were followers of Jackl.

<sup>100</sup>Petzoldt (ed.), *Sagen aus Salzburg*, 176–8.

<sup>101</sup>Fritz Byloff, *Hexenglaube und Hexenverfolgung in den österreichischen Alpenländern* (Berlin, 1929), 153–4.

<sup>102</sup>Depiny, *Oberösterreichisches Sagenbuch*, nos. 10 and 11, 164.

traces of the so-called hunting culture in the witch legends of the low regions like the Burgenland on the other hand. Thus, the motifs bound to Alpine figures like the Percht, Trud, Schrätel and, in some cases, the Wild Women (either helping or often also punishing) are transferred to the latter witch legends, which is facilitated by their similar attributes.

Main motifs, like the witches' ride to high mountains, are very often combined with the witness motif: The witch is unwittingly or deliberately accompanied by clumsy witnesses who get the flying spell wrong or is often not even known to be a witch by her own husband but is a teacher to her female offspring. The old motif of the competition between magicians recurs in the fighting between witches and witch banishers. Her end is always terrible and the devil proves to be the greatest cheater of all. Other magical personae, such as the historical Zauberer Jackl, who became legendary, seem to be higher in rank than the village witches, thereby serving as their teacher.

Ancient elements or obvious traces of shamanistic motifs are to be found at the boundaries between Austrian Alpine and Hungarian lowland culture. In some details, the peculiar Austrian Alpine witch merges with the historic figure of the witch trials, and one sees how history and tales overlap.

Cultures of Witchcraft in Europe from the Middle Ages  
to the Present

Barry, J.; Davies, O.; Usborne, C. (Eds.)

2018, XXIV, 283 p. 3 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-63783-9