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The Ordeal by Water (Swimming of Witches) in the East Slavic World

During the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, much of Western Europe was caught up in the phenomenon known as the witch craze.[1] Before it finally ended in the early eighteenth century this mass hysteria had claimed a goodly number of victims, mostly women, who were seized, tortured, tried, and executed, sometimes on the flimsiest of evidence, for alleged *maleficia* against their neighbors and heresy against the church.

Once the accusation of witchcraft was leveled against someone the judicial process, either formal or informal, was set in motion to determine whether the suspect was indeed a witch. On the Continent this was facilitated by torture and the *Malleus Maleficarum*, a manual of procedure compiled by the two German Dominicans Sprenger and Krämer and published in 1486.[2] Armed with the *Malleus*, a skillful inquisitor could maneuver the accused into admitting guilt for the most heinous of crimes and complicity in a variety of fiendish rites. Where the Inquisition and the *Malleus Maleficarum* were relatively unknown, as, for example, in England and the East Slavic world, the usual preliminary test for witchcraft was the ordeal by water, popularly referred to as "swimming a

1. Among the best general treatments of the witch craze in Western Europe is H. R. Trevor-Roper's controversial "The Witch-craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries" in *Religion, the Reformation and Social Change* (London, 1967). This article also has been published separately, under the same title, in a paperback edition. More recently, Norman Cohn has attempted a reevaluation of the European witch phenomenon in his thoughtful monograph, *Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt* (New York, 1975).

A word of explanation is necessary about the terms "witch" and "witchcraft" as they will be used in this paper. In the later sources, the terms *vedun* (warlock) and *ved'ma* (witch) are common, while "witchcraft" is frequently rendered as *koldovstvo* or *charodeistvo*. Earlier references to what may be construed as witches and witchcraft cover a broad range of pagan and occult practices including magic, spell casting, fortunetelling, divination, dream interpretation, weather manipulation, herb medicine, and so forth. Basically, however, in the eyes of the people a witch was a person of either sex who could mysteriously injure another. The damage a witch might do was technically called *maleficium* in the West. The Russian equivalent of *maleficium* was *porcha,* a term which in Old Russian denoted "damage" or "injury" of any sort (I. I. Sreznevskii, *Materialy dlia slovaria drevnerusskogo iazyka,* vol. 2 [Graz, 1955], p. 1756). As we shall see below, the most common form of *porcha* attributed to those who were tested for witchcraft by swimming was drought and crop failure.

2. The *Malleus Maleficarum,* no doubt reflecting the church's official position on judicial ordeals, rejected trial by fire and water in the prosecution of witches. For a discussion of

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witch."[3] The history of this quasi-legal institution, in its East Slavic setting, from earliest times to the late nineteenth century, will be traced in this paper.

The basis for the ordeal by water was the widely held belief that water, the pure and cleansing element, the instrument of baptism, would refuse to receive those tainted with crime.[4] Added to this was the widespread superstition that those who dabbled in the occult, that is, practiced sorcery or witchcraft, lost their specific gravity.[5]

In England the swimming of witches was already quite common by 1590.[6] In 1613 a pamphlet entitled *Witches Apprehended, Examined and Executed* was published in London. It contained both a detailed description and an illustration of the swimming, in 1612, of two Bedford witches, Mother Sutton and her daughter Mary.[7] The two were accused of a variety of crimes, not the least of which being the killing of the son of a certain Master Enger. As suspicion and fear of the two women mounted they were seized and taken to a nearby mill dam (where the water was sufficiently deep) for an informal, preliminary trial. Here they were bound, with arms crossed, stripped to their underclothes, and then cast into the water. A rope was tied about their middle, with the ends held by two men, one on either side of the stream. This last was done to ensure that the women, if innocent of witchcraft, could be pulled out of the water before they sank to the bottom and drowned.

Much to the delight of the assembled bystanders, both Mary and her mother floated to the surface during this initial phase of the trial. Consequently, they were removed from the water, examined for witches' marks and then subjected to a second swimming. This time, however, they were bound in the more traditional manner,[8] the left thumb tied to the right toe and the right thumb to the left toe, with a rope about their middle extended to the shore. Once more both of the women floated to the surface, confirming their guilt. They were subsequently imprisoned, brought to trial before the assize of Bedford, formally convicted of witchcraft, and executed.

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the church's attitude toward ordeals in general, see John W. Baldwin, "The Intellectual Preparation for the Canon of 1215 against Ordeals," *Speculum*, 36, no. 4 (October 1961): 613–36.

3. The swimming of witches was also practiced in other West and East European countries, particularly Germany, Spain, and Poland. On Germany and Spain see Julio Caro Baroja, *The World of the Witches*, trans. Nigel Glendinning (London, 1964), pp. 202–3. In Poland the cold water ordeal became quite popular as an unofficial test for witchcraft by the late seventeenth century. It was apparently brought to Poland from Germany (Bohdan Baranowski, *Procesy czarownic w Polsce w XVII i XVIII wieku* [Lodz, 1952], pp. 89–96).

4. H. C. Lea, *Superstition and Force*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, 1870), p. 247.

5. Ibid., pp. 253–55.

6. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York, 1971), p. 551.

7. The complete title reads: *Witches Apprehended, Examined and Executed, for notable villanies by them committed both by Land and Water. With a strange and most true trial how to know whether a woman be a Witch or not* (London, 1613), no pagination. The illustration appears on the cover of the pamphlet. It is reproduced in K. M. Briggs, *Pale Hecate's Team* (London, 1962), following p. 56.

8. Described by John Brand in his *Observations on the Popular Antiquities of Great Britain*, vol. 3 (London, 1855), pp. 21–22.

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Among the Eastern Slavs, trial by water in certain cases of alleged witchcraft was well established by the mid-twelfth century. Abu Hāmid al-Gharnātī (1080 or 81-1169/81-1170), the Arabic traveler-merchant who visited Kiev in 1153,[9] has left us the following intriguing account of a multiple witch swimming and burning which he either witnessed, or heard about from others:

> Every twenty years the old women of this country become guilty [suspected?] of witchcraft, which causes great concern among the people. Then they seize all those they find in this area and throw them, feet and fists tied [together], into a big river [Dnieper?] that passes through. . . . Those who stay afloat are considered to be witches and are burned; those who, on the contrary, go under are declared innocent of all witchcraft and are set free again.[10]

Several facts in this passage merit closer scrutiny. First, there is the opening phrase, "every twenty years." Is one to infer from this that the Eastern Slavs, quite early in their history and several hundred years before the onset of the witch craze in the West, were already engaged in periodic witch hunts? Yes and no. While there is no evidence to substantiate Abu Hāmid's claim that such witch trials and executions were conducted at regular twenty-year intervals, there is perhaps some truth to his assertion as the following examples illustrate. According to the Primary Chronicle, there was in Suzdal' in 1024 a severe famine caused by drought. A number of old people were ultimately put to death in connection with this natural calamity.[11] In 1070–71 a famine was decimating the Rostov area. Here, too, a number of older and younger women were executed because they were thought to be responsible for the serious food shortage.[12] Both of these incidents suggest that in times of stress and strain the early Slavs,

9. C. E. Dubler, *Abū Hāmid el Granadino y su relacion de viaje por tierras eurasiaticas* (Madrid, 1953), p. 129; see also map following page 132. Another source (*Ukrains'ka radians'ka entsiklopediia*, vol. 1 [Kiev, 1959], p. 17) maintains that Abu Hāmid actually visited Kiev on three separate occasions between 1150 and 1153, and that he was received by Prince Iziaslav Mstislavovich.

10. M. Charmoy, "Relation de Mas'oudy et d'autres musulmans surs les anciens Slaves" in *Mémoires de l'Akademie des Sciences de S. Petersbourg* (Series 6), 2 (1834): 342–43. See also Volodymyr Hnatiuk's "Kupanie i palenie vid'm u Halychyni," *Materialy do ukrains'koi etnol'ogii*, 15 (1912): 189.

11. S. H. Cross and O. P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, eds. and trans., *The Russian Primary Chronicle* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), p. 134. It is not clear from the sources whether or not these "old people" were of both sexes or women only. Unlike Western Europe, where women predominate as victims of the witch hunts, in Russia men were as frequently implicated as women. In fact, surviving court records show that during the seventeenth century there were more men (fifty-nine) than women (forty) actually tried for witchcraft in the Muscovite courts (see note 37 below). In the West women were singled out as witches because, according to scholastic tradition, as members of the "weaker" sex they were far more susceptible to Satan's wiles. In medieval Russia no such distinction between the sexes existed, except in cases of drought or famine, where women, especially those who were old and barren, were apparently looked upon as the antithesis of fertility and plenty and were thus singled out for unofficial persecution. Generally speaking, the church looked upon witchcraft as a manifestation of surviving paganism to which all the people were equally prone.

12. Ibid., pp. 150–51.

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like many other primitive peoples, sought to alleviate hardship by means of living scapegoats. Apparently this practice frequently took on all of the aspects of a witch hunt.[13]

The relationship between natural calamity and periodic witch hunts in medieval Russia becomes even more clearly defined in a rather remarkable sermon of the thirteenth-century bishop of Vladimir, Serapion.[14] To place Serapion's sermon in its proper context it is essential to bear in mind that at the time of its writing Russia was in the throes of a devastating famine which had begun in 1271 and did not end until 1274.[15] The following quote is from this Fourth Sermon of the venerable bishop[16]:

> And you still cling to pagan traditions; you believe in witchcraft and burn innocent people and bring down murder upon the earth and the city. . . . Out of what books or writings do you learn that famine on earth is brought about by witchcraft? If you believe these things then why do you burn [witches]? You pray to them and implore them and bring them gifts, as if they had dominion over the earth—permitting rain, bringing warmth, making the land fruitful. In the past three years there has been no harvest not only in Rus' but among the Latins [of the West] as well. Are witches responsible for this? Can God not order his creation if he wants to punish us for our sins? . . . The laws of God command that there be many witnesses before a man is condemned to death. You make water the witness and say: if she begins to sink, she is innocent; if she floats she is a witch. Is it not possible that the devil himself, seeing your weak faith, supported her so that she would not sink, thus contributing to your own perdition? For, you prefer the testimony of an inanimate substance to that of a created human being.[17]

Serapion leaves little doubt in his sermon as to the close relationship between natural calamity and the persecution of witches in medieval Russia. Three years of widespread, uninterrupted famine must have produced a considerable number of unofficial local witch trials and executions, and this provoked the bishop of Vladimir to speak out vehemently against such irrational vigilante tactics. He tries to appeal to reason and logic by decrying the cynicism of the people who, on the one hand, implore witches for miracles and then, in frustration, commit these same unfortunate women to the flames.

13. This was a phenomenon by no means unique to the Eastern Slavs. As Alan Macfarlane has recently written: "It is recognized, both by anthropologists and their informants, that periods of stress are likely to increase witchcraft suspicions" (Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* [New York, 1970], p. 249).

14. Serapion had been abbot of the Pecherskii monastery in Kiev. He was made bishop of Vladimir in 1274. He died a year later (E. V. Petukhov, *Serapion Vladimirskii, russkii propovednik XIII veka,* in *Zapiski istoriko-filologicheskago fakul'teta Imperatorskago S.-Peterburgskago universiteta,* 17 [1888]: 1).

15. Arcadius Kahan, "Natural Calamities and Their Effect Upon the Food Supply in Russia (An Introduction to a Catalogue)," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas,* 16, no. 3 (September 1968): 368.

16. Petukhov, *Serapion Vladimirskii,* pp. 11–13 (Appendix, text of sermon), pp. 63–68 (commentary on text).

17. Ibid., pp. 11–12.

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In addition to providing a clue to the underlying pattern which characterized these earliest recorded witch hunts in the East Slavic world, Serapion's sermon also helps to confirm several other points made by Abu Hāmid. According to both accounts, many of the suspects in these early witch trials (especially where the accused was being charged with causing drought or famine) were women; the punishment meted out to the guilty was death by burning, and the method of establishing guilt or innocence was the ordeal by cold water.

The swimming of witches, or cold water ordeal (*judicum aquae frigidae*), while not unknown in the medieval West, was rarely used to determine witchcraft prior to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Even then, during the height of the witch craze, it was common, as we have seen, only in England and, to a lesser extent, in Germany, Spain, and Poland. In the East Slavic world, by contrast, it was apparently widely practiced by the mid-twelfth century. One might say that in this instance the West lagged behind the East and that the Eastern Slavs were quite unique in their use of the cold water ordeal as a test for witchcraft. This naturally raises the question of the origin of witch swimming in the East Slavic world. Was it an indigenous phenomenon, or was it an outgrowth of the judicial ordeal so common in the Teutonic world, a custom perhaps brought over by the Varangians?

There is, of course, the possibility that the swimming of witches did evolve from the judicial ordeal (by iron or water) which, as Vernadsky seems to imply, was probably borrowed by the Slavs from the Germans.[18] The Expanded Version of the *Pravda Russkaia*, which evolved during the course of the twelfth century, contains the following articles: "And if [the defendant] is unable to produce witnesses but [in his turn] accuses his accuser of the homicide, let them be given an ordeal by iron" (article 21).[19] "And the same refers to all lawsuits, including theft and their accusations. If the [stolen] thing is not produced, give him [that is, the plaintiff] [ordeal by] iron even against his will [in case the amount of the damages] is over one half of a *grivna* gold. If [the amount] is less [than a half *grivna* gold] but over 2 [silver] *grivna*, [the ordeal is] by water. And if the amount is less [than 2 silver *grivna*], then let him [the plaintiff] take the oath concerning his money" (article 22).[20] There is no mention either in this or any other early East Slavic legal code of using the ordeal by water for the purpose of determining witchcraft. This is not surprising, however, since witchcraft came very early under the jurisdiction of the church. Vladimir the Great's Church Statute (*Ustav*) enumerates the crimes which are to be tried in the ecclesiastical courts. Among these are witchcraft and the use of spells, talismans, and potions.[21]

18. George Vernadsky, ed. and trans., *Medieval Russian Laws* (New York, 1969), p. 12. V. B. Antonovich also traces the origins of witch swimming in the East Slavic world to Germany (and France) (V. B. Antonovich, *Koldovstvo: Dokumenty, protsessy, izsliedovanie* [St. Petersburg, 1877], p. 26).

19. Ibid., p. 38.

20. Ibid., pp. 38–39. The ordeal by iron is also mentioned in article 87 of the Expanded Version of the *Pravda* (ibid., pp. 50–51).

21. S. V. Iushkov, ed., *Pamiatniki russkogo prava*, vol. 1: *Pamiatniki prava kievskogo gosudarstva X–XII vv.*, comp. A. A. Zimin (Moscow, 1952), article 7, p. 238.

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My own inclination is to regard the practice of witch swimming among the Eastern Slavs as an indigenous phenomenon, with roots lying deep in hoary antiquity. The swimming of witches to determine innocence or guilt is well attested in the early East.[22] Among the Indo-European peoples it is one of the most ancient of tests and can be found among the laws of Babylonia. Article 2 of the Code of Hammurabi, for example, reads as follows: "If a man has charged a man with sorcery and then has not proved (it against) him, he who is charged with the sorcery shall go to the holy river; he shall leap into the holy river and, if the holy river overwhelms him, his accuser shall take and keep his house; if the holy river proves that man clear (of the offense) and he comes back safe, he who has charged him with sorcery shall be put to death; he who leapt into the holy river shall take and keep the house of his accuser."[23]

It is not my intention to suggest here some sort of direct relationship between certain Mesopotamian and East Slavic legal institutions. On the other hand, one cannot overlook the fact that the Scythians did at one time come under the influence of Mesopotamian and Iranian civilization. According to Rostovtzeff, this Oriental current of influence was strongest during the sixth century B.C. It came primarily by way of the Caucasus.[24] It is quite possible that the practice of swimming sorcerers and sorceresses, so widespread in the Semitic world, could have very early penetrated into the Slavonic world where it eventually became a part of customary law. Judging from the vehemence with which Serapion condemned the practice, calling it an abominable pagan holdover, it is understandable that witch swimming never became sanctioned as part of accepted legal procedure among the postconversion Slavs.[25]

One additional piece of evidence, which lends support to the Mesopotamian (via the Caucasus) theory, is the fact that witch swimming had long been a well-established tradition among the Georgian people.[26] As late as 1811, a complaint was filed with the governor of the Caucasus region by thirteen older women from Novo-Aleksandrovskoe against the people of the village for subjecting them to the swimming ordeal. At the time, the villagers were suffering from the effects of a severe drought and the old women were suspected of withholding rain by means of witchcraft. The thirteen suspected witches were seized, had their hands tied, and were then thrown into water. Apparently all thirteen passed the test successfully as there were no executions or other punishment meted out.[27]

Between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries there are no recorded instances of witch swimming in the East Slavic world. One possible explanation

22. J. Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentums*, 3rd ed. (Berlin, 1961), pp. 159–60.

23. G. R. Driver and J. C. Miles, eds. and trans., *The Babylonian Laws*, vol. 2 (Oxford, 1955), pp. 13–14. The water ordeal is also prescribed in cases of alleged adultery. If the accused woman has not been caught in the act, her husband can demand that she clear herself by means of the water ordeal (ibid., p. 53, article 132).

24. M. I. Rostovtzeff, *Iranians and Greeks in South Russia* (Oxford, 1922), pp. 54–55, 208, passim.

25. It has also been suggested, by an anonymous reader of this essay, that the lack of surviving sources on church law during the Kievan period may account for the lack of specific references to use of the ordeal by water.

26. P. I. Efimenko, "Sud nad ved'mami," *Kievskaia starina*, 7 (November 1883): 386.

27. *Akty sobrannye Kavkazskoiu Arkheograficheskoiu Kommissieiu*, vol. 4 (Tiflis, 1870), no. 146, pp. 958–59. Reprinted in *Zhivaia starina*, nos. 1–4 (1894), pp. 122–23.

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for this, at least as far as Muscovite Russia is concerned, is the disappearance, by the late sixteenth century, of ordeal and trial by combat from Muscovite legal procedure.[28] Witch executions, with or without trials, continued, sporadically, all during this period. The Chronicle of Pskov, for example, states somewhat tersely that in 1411 "the people of Pskov burned twelve witches."[29] No explanation is offered for this mass auto-da-fé. Nor is there any indication as to whether or not those accused were first tested for witchcraft. It should be noted, however, that a serious plague was decimating many parts of Russia at the time of this multiple execution in Pskov.[30] The close relationship between natural calamity and witch hunting comes into bold relief once again.

While natural calamity might have inspired many of the earlier, unofficial witch hunts, there is also evidence that certain witch persecutions, particularly during the later Muscovite period, were politically motivated. In 1497, according to the chronicles, Ivan III seized and interrogated some "evil women," presumably witches, who had visited his wife Sophia with poisonous herbs. Sophia had at the time fallen into disgrace (*opala*) because of her implication in the conspiracy against Ivan.[31] The evil women were subsequently ordered drowned in the Moscow River in the dead of night.[32] The executions, though ostensibly for witchcraft, were more than likely ordered because the accused had been indirectly drawn into the conspiracy with Sophia. After the great fire in Moscow in 1547, a rumor, no doubt politically inspired, was circulated throughout the city attributing the disaster to witchcraft. To quote from the chronicle: "They [that is, the people of Moscow] began to say that Princess Anna Glinskaia together with her children and her people engaged in witchcraft: she removed human hearts and placed them in water and with this water she rode about Moscow sprinkling the city and thus Moscow burned."[33] According to Solov'ev, Boris Godunov falsely accused the Romanovs of using witchcraft to wrest the throne from him in 1601 and thus had the entire family exiled.[34]

An even more graphic illustration of the political implications of witchcraft accusations can be found outside the capital. In 1670 some seventy *klikushi,*

28. Ann M. Kleimola, *Justice in Medieval Russia: Muscovite Judgment Charters ("Pravye Gramoty") of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, n.s., vol. 65, part 6 (October 1975), p. 66.

29. A. N. Nasonov, ed., *Pskovskie letopisi*, vol. 2 (Moscow, 1955), p. 36.

30. N. Ia. Novombergskii, *Vrachebnoe stroenie v do-Petrovskoi Rusi* (Tomsk, 1907), pp. 17–18. It is also possible that this execution of witches in Pskov was a consequence of Metropolitan Fotii's letter of 1410, urging the people of Novgorod and the surrounding area to rid themselves of all vestiges of paganism, including witchcraft ("Poslanie mitropolita Fotiia v Novgorod o sobliudenii zakonopolozhenii tserkovnykh," *Russkaia istoricheskaia biblioteka*, vol. 6 [St. Petersburg, 1880], p. 274).

31. The conspiracy and its aftermath are detailed by J. L. I. Fennell in *Ivan the Great of Moscow* (London, 1963), pp. 315–57.

32. *Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisei,* vol. 6: *Sofiiskiia letopisi* (St. Petersburg, 1853), p. 279.

33. Ibid., vol. 13, part 2, sec. 2: *Tak nazyvaemaia tsarstvennaia kniga* (St. Petersburg, 1906), p. 456. See also I. I. Smirnov, *Ocherki politicheskoi istorii russkogo gosudarstva 30–50kh godov XVI veka* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1958), pp. 122–27.

34. S. M. Solov'ev, *Istoriia Rossii s drevneishikh vremen,* vol. 4 (Moscow, 1960), pp. 394–95.

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women who claimed to be possessed and who would rant and rave hysterically during church services calling out the names of those who they claimed had bewitched them, virtually terrorized the town of Shuia with their accusations, prompting the panic-stricken local authorities to petition the tsar for help.[35]

During the seventeenth century, a considerable number of witch trials were initiated in Muscovite Russia. (The possible reasons for this apparent increase in civil witchcraft prosecutions will not be explored here, since that would take us far beyond the scope of this essay.[36]) Most of the documents pertaining to these seventeenth-century trials have been preserved in the Moscow Archives of the Ministry of Justice (*Moskovskii Arkhiv Ministerstva Iustitsii*).[37] They paint a rather grim picture of endless interrogations, of ingenious methods of torture (sometimes resulting in the death of both innocent and guilty suspects), of false accusations and confessions under duress, and, less frequently, of burning and exile. Significantly, however, there is no mention of, nor even an indirect allusion to, the swimming of witches. It seems from these and other contemporary sources that the ordeal by water as a test for witchcraft had quite early fallen into desuetude in Russia proper, never to reappear.

The case in the Ukraine, particularly in Galicia, was quite different. There the cold water ordeal was not only revived in the early eighteenth century (perhaps as a result of Polish influence), but was apparently also improvised upon, allowing, in some instances, for a simpler and less hazardous test for witchcraft known as water-bearing. As far as can be determined, the water-bearing ordeal was unique to the Ukraine. It was used frequently in times of severe drought and has been described as follows: women suspected of withholding rain were rounded up and ordered to carry pails of water from a nearby river or pond to a designated cross or some other religious shrine (located at a crossroads near the village) and to pour the water over it. Those who bore the water without any spillage were declared innocent and were set free. Those, on the other hand, who spilled some of the water along the way were judged to be witches and were held accountable for the drought.[38]

The traditional method of testing for witchcraft, by swimming, was far more prevalent, however, in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Ukraine. A number of rather detailed accounts of these "modern" witch swimmings have been preserved. The earliest dates from 1709 and can be found in the town records of Kamenets'-Podil'skii. A village in the province of Podilia was experiencing a drought. Some of the local gentry met and concluded that witches must be responsible for the lack of rain and decided that all of the peasant women in

35. V. A. Borisov, *Opisanie goroda Shui i ego okrestnostei* (Moscow, 1851), pp. 339–40. See also A. A. Levenstim, "Sueverie i ugolovnoe pravo," *Vestnik prava,* part 1, no. 1 (1906), p. 329.

36. This question will be addressed in a forthcoming essay entitled "Witchcraft Trials in Seventeenth-Century Russia."

37. More than half of these court records have been published by N. Ia. Novombergskii in *Koldovstvo v Moskovskoi Rusi XVII veka* (St. Petersburg, 1906). The rest appear in the appendixes to the following by the same author: *Materialy po istorii meditsiny v Rossii,* vol. 4 (Tomsk, 1907), Appendix nos. 5, 7, 10, 11, 46, 47, 51; and *Vrachebnoe stroenie v do-Petrovskoi Rusi,* nos. 16–20, 28, 35, 37–41, 44, 47, 55, 60, 151, 155, 171, 172.

38. Efimenko, "Sud nad ved'mami," p. 383; and Antonovich, *Koldovstvo,* p. 27.

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the village must undergo a test for witchcraft. Each was required to carry a pail of water from the nearby Zbruch River and to pour it over a cross which stood by the roadside some distance from the village. Since all of the peasant women successfully passed this water-bearing test, they were declared innocent of witchcraft. Suspicion now fell upon the gentry women of the area, particularly a certain Iavorskaia. It seems that one of the spokesmen and chief organizers of the local witch hunt was the nobleman Druzhkovs'kii, a neighbor of Iavorskaia, who also happened to owe her a sizable amount of money. Perceiving a splendid opportunity to rid himself of his debt, Druzhkovs'kii began spreading the rumor that Iavorskaia was a witch and that it was she who was responsible for the drought.

A platform was erected on the banks of the Zbruch and Iavorskaia was ordered to appear before the assembled villagers. On orders from Druzhkovs'kii she was stripped naked and bound in the prescribed manner, her right thumb tied to her left toe and her left thumb to her right toe. A rope was tied around her middle by which she was lowered into the water. To the great disappointment of all, particularly Druzhkovs'kii, the woman did not float but sank to the bottom. She was immediately pulled out of the water and declared innocent of witchcraft.[39]

In 1711 there was a multiple swimming of witches in the town of Dubno, Volynia province. At the request of the nobleman Fedor Kovnats'kii, the local magistrate ordered ten of the townswomen to undergo the cold water ordeal on the suspicion that they were causing a drought. All ten failed the test and were immediately imprisoned. It was only through the urgent pleas and pledges of surety by the husbands of the respective "witches" that the ten were finally set free in the custody of their spouses to await further court action.[40]

During the nineteenth century there was no apparent abatement in the incidence of witch swimming in the Ukraine. If anything, the available sources indicate an increase rather than a decrease in the number of such ordeals. In 1839 the Ukrainian writer Kvitka Osnovianenko, describing the theme of his short story "Konotops'ka vid'ma" in a letter to P. A. Pletnev, writes: "The drowning of witches during times of drought is not a thing of the past but is, with all its horrible consequences, amazingly enough, still practiced in the neighboring province."[41] In actual fact, few provinces or geographical areas were free of the practice. Among the most widely publicized were two multiple swimmings in southern Ukraine, one near the town of Chyhyryn in 1833,[42] another near Uman in the late 1850s.[43] In May of 1872 all of the women from the village of Dzhurkovo, in the Stanyslaviv district, were herded together and then taken to the river. Over the objections of the parish priest, they were stripped, bound in the traditional manner, and thrown into the water. One of the victims of the Dzhurkovo swimming suffered permanent loss of hearing while several others fell seriously ill as a result of the ordeal. This prompted the local authorities to launch

39. Antonovich, *Koldovstvo*, p. 27.
40. Ibid., p. 59, n. 15.
41. G. Danilevskii, *Osnov'ianenko* (St. Petersburg, 1856), p. 91.
42. Hnatiuk, "Kupanie i palenie vid'm u Halychyni," p. 190.
43. Ibid., p. 191.

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an investigation. Ultimately the initiators of the swimming were brought to trial, were convicted, and were punished with imprisonment.[44] The last recorded multiple witch swimming in the Ukraine took place in the province of Kherson in 1885.[45]

The ordeal by water, or swimming of witches, was one of the most ancient and durable of informal judicial procedures to survive among the East Slavic people. In its method and criteria for guilt or innocence it remained remarkably constant for over seven hundred years. What were some of the reasons for the survival of this primitive practice, and how does it relate to the broader question of witchcraft and witch hunting in the East Slavic world?

To begin with, it should be noted that although the swimming ordeal was used to try witches accused of any and all crimes in Western Europe, particularly England, in the East Slavic world it was restricted largely to cases involving drought and famine. This is significant both from a religious and an economic standpoint. From the religious standpoint it provides yet another example of the pertinacity of pagan beliefs among the people, beliefs which had for centuries coexisted with Christianity, giving rise to that unique feature of East Slavic spirituality known as *dvoeverie*. As G. P. Fedotov has so eloquently demonstrated, the core of East Slavic paganism was not the belief in a pantheon of great gods but rather the veneration of nature herself in her elements and phenomena.[46] Not only was there widespread acceptance of the fact that certain individuals (that is, witches) possessed the power to control the forces of nature—in the words of Serapion, "permitting rain, bringing warmth, making the land fruitful" —but there also was a readiness to call upon nature to bear solemn witness when these forces were disturbed or tampered with. Implicit also in the witchcraft phenomenon was the juxtaposition of the cult of Mother Earth, the symbol of fertility and plenty, with the female witch, a barren, malefic being associated with infertility, drought, and famine. Thus, one can conclude that, among the Eastern Slavs, the intellectual rationale for witch swimming and, by extension, witchcraft was predicated on a pantheistic conception of the universe rather than a demonological one, as was true in the West.

From an economic standpoint the East Slavic witch persecutions point up the total dependence of a basically agricultural society on climate and the weather, with all its vagaries. When prolonged drought set in and the community was threatened with famine and death, it was not uncommon, particularly in parts of the Ukraine, for all the local women, peasant and gentry alike, to be subjected to the swimming ordeal.[47] Such draconian measures bring into sharp focus the close relationship between natural calamity and witch hunting.

Finally, there is some indication that, in addition to natural calamity and political intrigue, there may have been other forces at work which contributed to outbreaks of official and unofficial witch persecution in the East Slavic world. The eagerness of the nobleman Druzhkovs'kii to have his neighbor, Iavorskaia

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. G. P. Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind: Kievan Christianity, the Tenth to the Thirteenth Centuries* (New York, 1960), chapters 1 and 12.

47. Efimenko, "Sud nad ved'mami," p. 383.

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(to whom he was indebted financially) tested for witchcraft raises the possibility that the witch issue might also have been exploited for personal reasons. Assuming the sources are there, however, much more research, along the lines recently suggested by Boyer and Nissenbaum, will have to be done before one can draw any meaningful sociological conclusions about East Slavic witchcraft.[48]

48. Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974).

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