

DBQ # 1: “Witch” Craze

Directions:

The following question is based on the accompanying Documents 1–7. The documents have been edited for the purpose of this exercise. This question is designed to test your ability to apply several historical thinking skills simultaneously, including historical argumentation, use of relevant historical evidence, contextualization, and synthesis. Your response should be based on your analysis of the documents and your knowledge of the topic.

For the document-based question, a good response should:

- respond to the question with an evaluative thesis that makes a historically defensible claim. The thesis must consist of one or more sentences located in one place, either in the introduction or the conclusion. Neither the introduction nor the conclusion is necessarily limited to a single paragraph.
- describe a broader historical context immediately relevant to the question that relates the topic of the question to historical events, developments, or processes that occur before, during, or after the time frame of the question. This description should consist of more than merely a phrase or a reference.
- explain how at least one additional piece of specific historical evidence, beyond those found in the documents, relates to an argument about the question. (This example must be different from the evidence used to earn the point for contextualization.) This explanation should consist of more than merely a phrase or a reference.
- use historical reasoning to explain relationships among the pieces of evidence provided in the response and how they corroborate, qualify, or modify the argument, made in the thesis, that addresses the entirety of the question. In addition, a good response should utilize the content of at least six documents to support an argument about the question.
- explain how the document’s point of view, purpose, historical situation, and/or audience is relevant to the argument for at least four of the documents.

Task:

Using the following documents, identify and analyze reasons for the persecution of individuals as witches in Europe from the late fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries.

Document 1

"As for the question, why a greater number of witches is found in the fragile feminine sex than among men . . . the first is, that they are more credulous.... The second reason is, that women are naturally more impressionable, and more ready to receive the influence of a disembodied spirit; and that when they use this quality well they are very good, but when they use it ill they are very evil.... But the natural reason is that she is more carnal than a man.... And it should be noted that there was a defect in the formation of the first woman, since she was formed from a bent rib, that is, a rib of the breast, which is bent as it were in a contrary direction to a man... And since through this defect she is an imperfect animal, she always deceives."

— Kramer and Sprenger, The Hammer of Witches,
a handbook used by the Inquisition,
written in 1484 by two Dominican monks

Document 2

"It has recently come to our ears, not without great pain to us, that . . . many persons of both sexes, heedless of their own salvation and forsaking the Catholic faith, give themselves over to devils male and female.... We therefore, desiring, as is our duty . . . to remove all impediments by which . . . the . . . inquisitors are hindered in the exercise of their office . . . do hereby decree, by virtue of our apostolic authority, that it shall be permitted to the . . . inquisitors . . . to exercise their office of Inquisition and to proceed to the correction, imprisonment, and punishment of the aforesaid persons for their said offences and crime..."

— Pope Innocent VIII, "The Witch Bull," 1484

Document 3

" . . . sorcerers or witches are the Devil's whores who steal milk, raise storms, ride on goats or broomsticks, lame or maim people, torture babies in their cradles, change things into different shapes so that a human being seems to be a cow or an ox, and force people into love and immorality . . . not that the Devil is unable to do these things by himself without sorcerers, for he is lord of the world yet he will not act without human help."

— Martin Luther, preaching in 1522

Document 4

"There is one Alice Prabury in our parish that useth herself suspiciously in the likelihood of a witch, taking upon her not only to help Christian people of diseases strangely happened, but also horses and all other beasts. She taketh upon her to help by the way of charming, and in such ways that she will tell nobody her sayings."

—Report of Churchwardens in
Gloucestershire, England, 1563

Document 5

“This movement was promoted by many in office, who hoped for wealth from the persecution. And, so, from court to court throughout the towns and villages of all the diocese, scurried special accusers, Inquisitors, . . . dragging to trial and torture human beings of both sexes and burning them in great numbers Nor were spared even the leading men of the city of Trier. For the Judge with two Burgomasters, several Councillors and Associate Judges, canons of sundry collegiate churches . . . were swept away in this ruin Meanwhile notaries, copyists, and innkeepers grew rich. The executioner rode a blooded horse, like a noble of the court, and went clad in gold and silver; his wife vied noble dames in the richness of her array. The children of those convicted and punished were sent into exile; their goods were confiscated.”

—The Canon Linden, eyewitness to persecutions
in Trier, Holy Roman Empire, 1592

Document 6

“The bodies of aged persons are impure, which, when they [become diseased with malice, they use their very breath and their sight, being apt for contagion, and by the Devil whetted for such purpose, to the vexation and destruction of others. For if they which are troubled with the disease of the eyes called ophthalmia do infect others that look earnestly upon them, is it any marvel that these wicked creatures, having both bodies and minds in a higher degree corrupted, should work both these and greater mischiefs?”

— W. Fulbecke, A Parallele or Conference of
the Civil Law, the Canon Law and the Common Law, 1618

Document 7

"It is seldom that a poor old wretch is brought to trial . . . but there is, at the heels of her, a popular rage that could little less than demand her to be put to death; and if a judge is so clear and open as to declare himself against the impious vulgar opinion, that the devil himself has power to torment and kill innocent children, or that he is pleased to divert himself with the good people's cheese, butter, pigs and geese, . . . cry, this Judge hath no religion, for he doth not believe in witches."

—Roger North, brother of the Chief Justice in Exeter, England, in 1682