

The Witches' Sabbath in Scotland

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ABSTRACT

There are ample surviving references in the witchcraft trial material to indicate that the witches' sabbath became an important feature of the crime of witchcraft in Scotland. Comparison of the trial material has revealed numerous discrepancies between individual and group accounts of the witches' sabbath. The frequent inability of the witches to agree upon a time, date or place that the witches' sabbath took place have indicated that, in the cases studied, the witches' sabbath was not a genuine historical event. Elite beliefs and ideas about the witches' sabbath were frequently introduced during interrogations, and certainly left their mark upon the witchcraft records. However, the examination process was often a negotiation between witches and their interrogators, and as such, allowed many witches to incorporate their own beliefs and ideas into their descriptions of the witches' sabbath. Close reading of the trial material, combined with an analysis of contemporary presbytery records and popular ballads, provides evidence that many witches were drawing upon popular beliefs about fairies, magic and the supernatural, as well as their experiences at real life celebrations and festivities, to compose their descriptions of the witches' sabbath.

The majority of confessions that contain descriptions of the witches' sabbath are the product of this interrogation and negotiation process, but this research has also explored the possibility that the witches' sabbath might have been a real visionary experience for some witches, and that these visionary experiences were fantasies induced by psychological trauma, or a waking or sleeping vision similar to those experienced by tribal shamans.

This research has demonstrated that many pre-existing popular beliefs contributed to the formulation of the witches' descriptions of the witches' sabbath, and also stresses the importance of the influence of the interrogation process on the initial presence of the witches' sabbath in confessions. Although this research has been carried out within the context of Early Modern Scotland, it is likely to have wider implications for the study of the witches' sabbath in a European context.

THE HISTORY OF THE WITCHES' SABBATH

The witches' sabbath still represents one of the most widely debated and problematic concepts for historians of the Early Modern witch-hunts. The study of the witches' sabbath raises the question of whether there were self-

conscious witches, and whether descriptions were based on real gatherings that accused witches had attended. The witches' sabbath as a distinct concept came to the forefront of scholarly debate after Margaret Murray controversially argued that witches' sabbaths described in some witches' confessions proved the existence of a pre-Christian fertility cult

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which, she claimed, operated throughout Early Modern Europe.¹ Murray saw the witches' sabbath as a meeting that took place in the real, material world, and as a function attended by individuals in their material bodies.² However, this theory failed to gather much support from scholars and was eventually systematically demolished by Norman Cohn, who discovered severe methodological flaws in her research.³

Most witch-hunt historians recognise the important role played by the witches' sabbath as a tool with which interrogators could generate the names of further suspects. This theory has often encouraged historians to treat the witches' sabbath as an elite concept with no basis in popular belief. Cohn argued that the witches' sabbath, and the practices supposedly carried out there, represented a 'collective inversion of Christianity', and he also showed that accusations levelled at witches, including those of engaging in sexual orgies, infanticide and cannibalism, were used against many other marginal groups for hundreds of years prior to the witch-hunts.⁴ Similarly, Stuart Clark has argued that the ritual practices carried out at the witches' sabbath represented an inversion of established hierarchies and moral behaviour.⁵ Indeed, Robert Muchembled described the witches' sabbath as 'simply and solely a figment created by theologians'.⁶ This analysis of the

roots and elite interpretation of the witches' sabbath is certainly an important contribution to the understanding of the witches' sabbath in the minds of the educated elite. However, this elite demonological view of the witches' sabbath as the antithesis of cultural norms is not necessarily reflected in witches' own accounts of these gatherings.

Recent research suggests that some witches may have been drawing on real visionary experiences to construct their accounts of the witches' sabbath. Carlo Ginzburg was the first historian to argue that the origins of the witches' sabbath lay in ecstatic journeys to the realm of the dead.⁷ This idea that witches may have been having visionary experiences has been adopted by a number of continental and British scholars, and the discussion of the existence and function of spirit groups has flourished.⁸ Members of the spirit groups or cults, with known examples including the *benandanti*, the *donas de fuera* and the *táltos*, believed that their spirits left their bodies and went out to the other world.⁹ Research into the functioning of these groups has indicated that these soul-trips into the other world were likely to have been a real visionary experience for members of these cults.

Emma Wilby's recent research has indicated that some Scottish witches may also have had real visionary experiences in which they attended the witches' sabbath.¹⁰ Wilby has attributed these visionary experiences to shamanistic practices and dream cults which, she argues, may have been present within Early Modern Scotland.¹¹

1 Margaret Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (Oxford, 1921).

2 Gustav Henningsen, 'The Ladies from the Outside: An Archaic Pattern of the Witches' sabbath', in *Early Modern European Witchcraft: Centres and Peripheries*, (ed) Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen (Oxford, 1993), p 206.

3 Cohn, Norman, *Europe's Inner Demons: the demonization of Christians in medieval Christendom* (2nd edn, London, 1993), p 115.

4 *Ibid.*, p 102, p 14.

5 Stuart Clark, 'Inversion, Misrule and the Meaning of Witchcraft', *Past & Present*, 87 (May, 1980), pp 98–127.

6 Robert Muchembled, 'Satanic Myths and Cultural Reality', in *Early Modern European Witchcraft* (ed) Ankarloo and Henningsen (Oxford, 1993), p 139.

7 Ginzburg, Carlo, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' sabbath* (Chicago, 2004).

8 Eva Pócs, *Between the Living and the Dead: a Perspective on Witches and Seers in the Early Modern Age* (Budapest, 1999); Henningsen, 'The Ladies from the Outside'; Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie: Magic, Witchcraft and Dark Shamanism in Seventeenth-Century Scotland* (Sussex, 2010)

9 Julian Goodare, 'Scottish witchcraft in its European Context' in *Witchcraft and Belief in early modern Scotland* (Basingstoke, 2008), p 37.

10 Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, p 496.

11 *Ibid.*, p 533.

Wilby claims that the witches' practices would, like those of the *benandanti* and the *donas de fuera*, have been rooted in 'shamanistic spirit-group traditions of folkloric origin'.¹² Wilby also discusses the possibility that Scottish witches may have been members of dream cults, which were based on mutual dreaming and the sharing of those mutual dreams.¹³

Most Scottish accounts of the witches' sabbath bear little resemblance to the elite stereotypes discussed by Cohn, Clark and Muchembled. Instead, Christina Lerner argued that the Scottish witches' accounts of the witches' sabbath were based on the fantasies of the socially repressed population of Scotland. With kirk sessions and burgh councils issuing acts that condemned many social gatherings, Lerner argued that in response to those condemnations, the Scottish witches constructed accounts based on the activities and pastimes condemned by the authorities.¹⁴ However, to challenge Lerner's argument, this research analyses contemporary kirk session and presbytery records, which reveal that despite condemnation by the church authorities, the Scottish population continued to engage in festive celebrations throughout the period in question. In fact, it is possible that the witches were drawing on experiences at celebrations and festivities to construct their descriptions of the witches' sabbath.

In the course of a search for popular belief in the witches' sabbath, this research will begin with a close reading of the North Berwick trial material, combined with an analysis of pre-1590 witchcraft records, to trace the origins of the witches' sabbath in Scotland. The importance of the North Berwick witch-hunt as a pivotal point in the history of the Scottish witches' sabbath, and specifically the important role played by the educated interrogators involved in the North Berwick witch-hunt will also be discussed. The

influence of the interrogation process on witches' descriptions of the witches' sabbath, including the influence of leading questions and torture, is also stressed during this analysis.

The Scottish witches' sabbath will then be discussed in relation to popular belief about fairies, the supernatural and the other world. Comparisons will be made between witches' accounts of the witches' sabbath and descriptions of encounters with fairies, magic and the supernatural. During this discussion, material from popular ballads will be used alongside witchcraft confessions and dittays to establish the pre-existing popular beliefs that contributed to the formulation of witches' accounts of the witches' sabbath. These popular beliefs will specifically be taken into account when discussing the dates, times, places and activities described in confessions.

Finally, there will be a discussion concerning the role of visionary experience in the formulation of descriptions of the witches' sabbath in Scotland. During this discussion, the source of these visionary experiences in shamanistic practices, or physical or emotional trauma will be explored, along with the potential influences visionary experiences may have had on witches' confessions.

THE ORIGINS OF THE WITCHES' SABBATH IN SCOTLAND

The North Berwick witch trials of 1590 and 1591 have long been a subject of fascination for witchcraft scholars. The intimate involvement of James VI, and the scandalous suggestion that the king's own cousin, Francis Stewart Earl of Bothwell, had led a treasonable attempt on the king's life, has left scholars of the Scottish witch-hunt in no doubt of the importance of the trials that were to follow the king's stormy return to Scotland in the spring of 1590. In fact, these trials, and the subsequent executions, became the subject of *Newes from Scotland*, the only known 16th-century propaganda pamphlet

12 Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, p 532.

13 Ibid, p 516.

14 Christina Lerner, *Enemies of God: The Witch-hunt in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2000), p 153.

written about Scottish witches.¹⁵ With surviving primary sources including examinations, depositions, letters to the king, last speeches of the condemned, private diary entries, *Newes from Scotland* and James VI's *Demonologie*, much of which was based on his experiences during the North Berwick witch trials, this is one of the best-documented witchcraft cases in Scottish history. Although caution is required with records that were heavily influenced by educated interrogators and scribes, there remains the opportunity to catch a glimpse of the witches' sabbath in popular imagination through the eyes and interpretation of the elite interrogators and scribes.

In witchcraft trials that were marred by accusations of torture, and boast the involvement of the King of Scotland himself, it is unlikely that the confessions made by the accused witches were given freely.¹⁶ There is a high probability that the confessions of the North Berwick witches were shaped by the beliefs of the interrogators. If this was the case then the witches were creating descriptions of elaborate witches' sabbaths, based on elite beliefs about the nature of these meetings. However, it is also important to establish whether the North Berwick witches had any pre-existing belief in the witches' sabbath, and the activities that were carried out there, or whether this was an alien concept to them at the time of their interrogations in 1590 and 1591.

There are very few detailed Scottish witchcraft records from the period before the North Berwick witch-hunt, which might indicate that the documentation simply has not survived. The most detailed surviving records, including those of Bessie Dunlop, Alison Pierson, Janet Boyman and Catherine Ross, Lady

Foulis, indicate that both Scottish witches and interrogators were unconcerned with the witches' sabbath prior to the North Berwick witch-hunt.¹⁷ In general, these early cases are much less reliant upon demonological material than later witches' confessions, and in the confessions of Dunlop, Pierson and Boyman, spirit guides even took the place of the devil.¹⁸ Also, these witches primarily worked alone and, at this stage, the prosecution and conviction of individual witches seemed to satisfy the interrogators.

The case brought against Lady Foulis, however, not concluded until 1590 despite initial investigations taking place in 1577, did contain references to multiple witches employed by Lady Foulis, who met together to plot and carry out maleficent magic.¹⁹ But this was not the only charge levelled against Lady Foulis as she was simultaneously accused of murder. Her weapon of choice was poison and she was also accused of commissioning a wax image for use in maleficent magic.²⁰ In this case it is conceivable that the reported witches' meetings actually took place, but at the request of Lady Foulis rather than the devil.

The gathering of witches described in Lady Foulis's case, like some others during the course of the Scottish witch-hunt, can be seen as clearly distinct from the witches' sabbath. The most important features of the witches' sabbath were that multiple witches met in the presence of, and often at the request of, the devil. Therefore, a meeting of witches could be differentiated from the witches' sabbath in a number of ways; the devil's presence at these meetings is not indicated and, while the witches present on this

15 Lawrence Normand and Gareth Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland: James VI's Demonology and the North Berwick Witches* (Exeter, 2000), pp 309–24.

16 *Ibid.* *Newes from Scotland* indicates that both John Fian and Geillis Duncan had been tortured as part of their interrogation.

17 Robert Pitcairn (ed), *Criminal Trials in Scotland, 1488–1624*, 3 vols (Edinburgh, 1833), vol 1, pp 48–59; Pitcairn (ed), *Trials*, vol 1, pp 161–4; National Register of Scotland [hereafter NRS], JC26/1/67 – Trial of Janet Boyman; Pitcairn (ed), *Trials*, vol 1, pp 191–204.

18 Pitcairn (ed), *Trials*, vol 1, pp 48–59; Pitcairn (ed), *Trials*, vol 1, pp 161–4; NRS, Trial of Janet Boyman, JC26/1/67.

19 Pitcairn (ed), *Trials*, vol 1, pp 191–204.

20 *Ibid.*

occasion might have been known as witches at the time of the gathering or, more likely, have been identified as witches at a later point, these meetings, unlike the witches' sabbath, may have been real historical events.

Based on the lack of evidence in the pre-1590 witchcraft records, it appears that the witches' sabbath became a particular focus of interrogators' questions during the North Berwick witch-hunt. This new focus reflected a shift from the belief that witchcraft was primarily the crime of an individual to the belief that witches worked together in groups to carry out their evil plans, and it is hardly surprising that this shift in belief came with the North Berwick witch-hunt. This was no ordinary case of maleficent magic, but a conspiracy against the King of Scotland himself. When news of the arrest of witches in Denmark reached Scotland, a search began for Scottish collaborators in the treasonable conspiracy.²¹ In the investigations that followed, the hitherto neglected concept of the witches' sabbath played a key role in the identification of conspirators as, after all, where better for witches to plot against King James VI than at the witches' sabbath?

In the initial examination and confession of Geillis Duncan, in 1590, it is immediately apparent that the interrogators were concerned with identifying the gatherings that the North Berwick witches allegedly attended.²² Duncan confessed that she met the witches of Copenhagen at a meeting in the midst of the Firth of Forth, which she may have believed was half way between Scotland and Denmark.²³ It is possible to infer from the contents of her confession that Geillis Duncan was asked leading questions to confirm her part in the conspiracy. With the use of carefully directed questions, the interrogators were seeking to confirm the witches' sabbath as the event at which the witches of Scotland and Denmark met to plot against the Scottish king.

In Gibson's discussion of the Gun Powder Plot, she suggests that questions specifically tailored towards secrecy and conspiracy would have been used to interrogate suspects, and it is likely that questions were employed in a similar way during the North Berwick witch-hunt.²⁴ Due to the perceived threat of a secret legion of witches, the North Berwick witches were likely to have experienced unusually intensive questioning concerning accomplices and meeting places which, of course, would have had a significant influence on the confessions of the witches.

The North Berwick witch-hunt was also highly unusual due to the intimate involvement of the educated elite and King James VI himself. Many continental and English works of demonology may have been available to educated men before 1590, including Kramer and Sprenger's *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487), Jean Bodin's *De la demonomanie des sorciers* (1580), Johann Weyer's *De praestigiis daemonum* (1563), and Reginald Scot's *The Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584).²⁵ It is conceivable that these would also have been available to the educated elite in Scotland, and may also have been read by some of the men involved in the investigation of the North Berwick witches. The influence of the educated elite on this witch-hunt can clearly be seen when the demonological contents of the North Berwick witches' confessions are compared with pre-1590 witches' confessions, which contained comparatively few identifiable demonological elements.

The witchcraft pamphlet *Newes from Scotland* was published anonymously, but it has been convincingly argued by Lawrence Normand and Gareth Roberts that the author of

21 Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*, p 21.

22 Ibid, 136.

23 Ibid.

24 Marion Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft: Stories of Early English Witches* (London, 1999), p 18.

25 Christopher S Mackay, *The hammer of witches: a complete translation of the Malleus maleficarum*, (Cambridge, 2009); Jean Bodin, *On the Demon-mania of Witches* Trans. Randy A. Scott. Comp Jonathan L Pearl (Toronto, 1995); Johann Weyer, *De praestigiis daemonum* (ed) George Mora (New York, 1991); Reginald Scot, *The Discovery of Witchcraft* (ed) Montague Summers (New York, 1989).

this pamphlet was James Carmichael, minister of Haddington.²⁶ Whoever the author may have been, it can be assumed that he was an educated man, by the standards of 16th-century Scotland, capable of both reading and rewriting the story of the North Berwick witches and also, as will be argued later, familiar with the teachings of continental demonology. As an educated man and, if Normand and Roberts are correct in their assertion, a minister, the author of *Newes from Scotland* can offer proof that at least some members of the educated elite in Scotland were familiar with works of demonology and, as such, were likely to have been aware of the concept of the witches' sabbath.

The front leaf of the pamphlet *Newes from Scotland* claims it was written 'With the true examinations of the said doctor and witches as they uttered them in the presence of the Scottish king'.²⁷ If the author did have access to the records of the North Berwick witch trials then he was deliberately manipulating the contents of the witches' confessions during his composition of *Newes from Scotland*. There are quite a large number of examples of this data manipulation taking place during the author's descriptions of the witches' sabbaths. For example, in his account of the North Berwick Kirk witches' sabbath, the author claimed the witches sailed across the sea in sieves to reach the gathering.²⁸ However, both Geillis Duncan and Agnes Sampson, the only two North Berwick witches who specifically mentioned their journey to this meeting, claimed they arrived at the witches' sabbath on horseback.²⁹

As Normand and Roberts argue, the author of *Newes from Scotland* manipulated the historical truth available to him in the trial records and seasoned his accounts with fictional enhancements.³⁰ The author can be seen to

manipulate the data in order to produce an account that portrayed James VI in a favourable light, and also to produce a tale of moral justice for his readers to enjoy.³¹ These motivations have influenced the creation of *Newes from Scotland*, but it also appears that the author was manipulating the trial evidence to fit more closely with contemporary demonologists' ideas about the crime of witchcraft.

The author of *Newes from Scotland* claimed that the devil would 'carnally use them [the witches]' after he received them as his servants.³² However, as Normand and Roberts concur, sex with the devil is not mentioned during any of the confessions or dittays of the North Berwick witches.³³ Carnal copulation with the devil was not a feature of accusations against witches in Scotland, either during the North Berwick trials or prior to them, as far as the surviving evidence can indicate. Although sex with the devil became a recurring element during many later Scottish witches' confessions, there is little evidence to indicate that this concept would have been available outwith contemporary demonology, at this early stage. If this speculation is correct, it would lend support to the argument that the author of *Newes from Scotland* was familiar with at least one demonological text.

The description of the North Berwick Kirk witches' sabbath in *Newes from Scotland* does bear a resemblance to the witches' sabbaths described by Jean Bodin in *De la demonomanie des sorciers*.³⁴ A particular focus of Bodin's work is his attempt to reconcile the dispute amongst demonologists over whether the witches went in body or in spirit to the witches' sabbath.³⁵ During the description of the North Berwick Kirk witches' sabbath, the author of the

26 Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*, pp 291–3.

27 *Ibid.*, p 309.

28 *Ibid.*, p 314.

29 *Ibid.*, p 136, p 147.

30 *Ibid.*, pp 300–1.

31 Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*, p 301

32 *Ibid.*, p 317.

33 *Ibid.*

34 Jean Bodin, *On the Demon-mania of Witches* Trans. Randy A Scott. Comp Jonathan L Pearl (Toronto, 1995), p 120.

35 *Ibid.*, pp 116–17.

pamphlet claimed that the witches went 'very substantially' in a 'riddle or sieve' to the witches' sabbath, which seems to indicate he was aware of a contemporary debate about whether witches travelled to the witches' sabbath in body or in spirit.³⁶ The author also claimed that during the witches' sabbath at North Berwick Kirk, the witches sang a song, while Geillis Duncan played the trump:

*Comer go ye before, comer go ye:
If ye will not go before, comer let me.*³⁷

Interestingly, this song is not mentioned during any of the examination records, which were usually extremely detailed and even recorded many of the healing charms used by another accused witch, Agnes Sampson.³⁸ It would be extremely unusual, therefore, if this song was simply disregarded by the scribe. However, the song described in *Newes from Scotland* does bear a resemblance to the song that Jean Bodin claimed witches often sang at the witches' sabbath:

*har, har, Devil, Devil, jump here, jump there, play here, play there.*³⁹

It could, therefore, be speculated that the author had read Bodin's work and was using it as a guide, or perhaps simply for inspiration, to construct his own description of the witches' sabbath. The author of *Newes from Scotland* was clearly incorporating demonological material into his pamphlet, which indicates that some of the educated elites in Scotland, including this author, would have been familiar with demonological texts.

However, elite influence was not restricted to the demonological information conveyed in *Newes from Scotland*. The large numbers of witches' sabbaths that appear in the North Berwick witches' confessions are unusual

throughout the Scottish witch-hunt. The accused witch, Agnes Sampson, confessed to, or was accused by other confessing witches of, attending no fewer than eight witches' sabbaths, and perhaps even more if, as she claims, 'she was often enough out of Scotland on the sea in their riddles (sieves)'.⁴⁰ In fact, Sampson actually claimed that she also met with the devil alone, on a number of separate occasions, in addition to the witches' sabbaths she described.⁴¹ During Sampson's initial confession, given some time before December 1590, it is difficult to distinguish one meeting from another.⁴² However, by her next examination the 'Saturday before noon', which suggests that she had at least one night to consider and refine her descriptions of the witches' meetings she claimed to have attended she provided far more detail and made deliberate distinctions between meetings.⁴³ Indeed, Sampson's descriptions of the witches' sabbaths that she attended were developed over the course of a number of subsequent confessions, and were clearly influenced by the interrogators' leading questions. This development process was common among the North Berwick witches, and shows how initial confessions could be developed into elaborate narratives through a negotiation between interrogators and suspects.

The impossible nature of the activities that the suspected witches claimed to have taken part in, and the often obvious discrepancies between the accounts of the witches' sabbath, suggest that in most cases the presence of the witches' sabbath in confessions was a product of leading questions. In January 1591, Geillis Duncan claimed that the North Berwick Kirk witches' sabbath took place on Michaelmas.⁴⁴ However, Janet Stratton confessed in May 1591 that the North Berwick Kirk witches' sabbath

36 Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*, p 314.

37 Ibid, p 315.

38 Ibid, pp 236–7.

39 Bodin, *On the Demon-mania of Witches*, p 120.

40 Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*, p 139.

41 Ibid, pp 139–40.

42 Ibid, pp 136–8.

43 Ibid, pp 138–40.

44 Ibid, p 153.

took place on All Hallows' Eve.⁴⁵ If both witches had attended the same meeting then their accounts would have agreed on the date the event occurred, but clearly the interrogators were willing to overlook such anomalies in their determination to punish those perceived as conspirators. Indeed, it is not uncommon for witches to provide conflicting accounts of the same meeting, which certainly seems to support the argument that they had not attended a real meeting.

The witches' sabbath is an extremely complicated element of the witches' accounts of their crimes, due in large part to the alleged involvement of multiple witches. Despite some obvious discrepancies between accounts of the witches' sabbath, there is often a certain level of continuity. Maxwell-Stuart has argued that it is possible that, during their confessions, the North Berwick witches were describing events that had actually taken place, and were implicating other individuals who were also present at these events.⁴⁶ However, as it is unlikely that in reality those women and men accused of attending the witches' sabbath sailed out to sea in boats shaped like sieves, or gathered to worship the devil himself in the pulpit of North Berwick Kirk, we must look for an explanation of the continuity between confessions elsewhere.

The types of questions that would have been asked directed suspects towards specific answers, and interrogators used information from other suspects' confessions to ensure that witches made complimentary accounts. Agnes Sampson's confession from 5 December 1590 includes what might have been scribal shorthand or evidence of leading questions: 'And confesseth the drowning of the boat, in all points conform to the said Geillis Duncan's deposition.'⁴⁷ If, as it has been argued, these

meetings did not take place, it would have been impossible for Duncan and Sampson to have given the same account. Thus, it is likely the interrogators were using information gleaned from previous examinations to question other suspects.

In many cases, accused witches made false confessions. False confessions can be divided into three basic categories: 'voluntary', 'coerced-compliant' and 'coerced-internalised'.⁴⁸ A 'voluntary' false confession is primarily associated with protecting a guilty party, usually a spouse, family member or friend, or with non-responsibility caused by mental illness or substance abuse when the confessor mistakenly believes that they have committed a crime.⁴⁹ This type of 'voluntary' false confession always takes place without any external pressure from interrogators or peers.⁵⁰ 'Coerced-compliant' false confessions are elicited with external pressure, whether from the interrogators or acquaintances of the individual, and are thought to have been made by a vulnerable, but ultimately sane, individual as a result of mental and physical stress caused by their confinement and hostile interrogations.⁵¹ These 'coerced-compliant' false confessions can be made by the individual with or without belief. For example, the witch may confess to taking part in a witches' sabbath to alleviate her or his suffering in the short term, or in response to promises of leniency if they produced the desired confession. In the with-belief type of coerced-compliant false confession, the accused may 'cave-in' during interrogations and accept responsibility for a crime they have no memory of, but have become convinced that they have committed.⁵² Typically, these types of confessions are recanted when the immediate pressure of the interrogation is alleviated.⁵³ Finally, 'coerced-internalised' false

45 Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*, p 173.

46 P G Maxwell-Stuart, *Satan's Conspiracy: Magic and Witchcraft in Sixteenth-century Scotland* (East Linton, 2001), pp 149–53.

47 Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*, p 148.

48 Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, p 216.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

confessions are made by an individual who has come to believe they committed a crime of which they are innocent.⁵⁴ During the process of interrogation, the individual becomes convinced that they committed the crime in question, and, in many cases, develop false memories of having done so. This type of false confession is not retracted after the interrogation has terminated as the accused has become convinced they committed the crime.⁵⁵

Emma Wilby argues in *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie* that Isobel Gowdie's apparent lack of interest in retracting her previous confessions reflected her personal conviction and belief in the contents of her confessions.⁵⁶ Of course, there is the possibility, as Wilby suggests, that Gowdie created false memories of the events and activities she described in her confession, as a result of hostile questioning.⁵⁷ In Wilby's opinion this would explain why Gowdie, convinced in her own mind, did not attempt to retract her confessions during her interrogations.⁵⁸ If this was the case then it could be argued the North Berwick witch, Agnes Sampson, had not created false memories of the witches' sabbaths she described during her initial confessions, as she attempted to retract these accounts during later examinations.⁵⁹ Perhaps Sampson was convinced of her own innocence throughout her examinations, but was unable to withstand the hostile questioning and torture, which she almost certainly was subjected to. Sampson was forced to retract her denial and this was recorded as follows, 'She denies the convention of North Berwick: she confesses this again.'⁶⁰

It is highly unlikely that any of the witches caught up in the North Berwick trials confessed voluntarily to their supposed crimes, as they would have had to make a full confession of

their crime without mental or physical duress; as far as the surviving documents can reveal, this was not the case. Suspects were apprehended, based on Geillis Duncan's accusations, and the witches were then brought before their local kirk session, central interrogators and even the king himself, to confess to their crimes.⁶¹ *Newes from Scotland* alleges that both Geillis Duncan and John Fian were subjected to cruel physical torture, including the thumbscrews and the Spanish-boots.⁶² Another common method of persuading witches to confess, often unrecorded in accounts of examinations, was sleep-deprivation, which caused the witches to become increasingly disorientated and eventually more compliant during their interrogations.⁶³ Furthermore, the suspected witches would have been deprived of contact with their families and friends and, as such, they would have felt isolated from their outside life. Therefore, it would be unsurprising if coerced-compliant false confessions were extracted from many individuals involved in these trials, as these women and men were vulnerable and under extreme pressure from interrogators determined to root out a conspiracy.

The individuals caught up in the North Berwick witch trials may not have been innocent of all of the crimes of which they were accused, but it can be argued that some elements of their confessions, including their descriptions of the witches' sabbath, were based on false confessions. These false confessions were extracted from suspected witches by elite interrogators who were clearly alarmed by this sudden outbreak of treasonable witchcraft. The unusual involvement of the educated elites in the North Berwick investigation certainly resulted in a more defined approach towards the demonological aspects of witchcraft. The

54 Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, p 216.

55 Ibid,

56 Ibid, p 220.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*, p 155.

60 Ibid.

61 Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*, p 145. Agnes Sampson was interrogated by James VI himself.

62 Ibid, p 312, p 322.

63 Stuart MacDonald, 'Torture and the Scottish Witch-Hunt: A Re-examination', *Scottish Tradition*, 27 (2002), p 102.

discovery of a conspiracy against King James VI certainly appears to have focused the educated elites on the possibility that multiple witches could – and did – meet together to worship the devil and plot maleficent magic. It was this shift in educated belief and understanding of the crime of witchcraft that appears to have led to the discovery of the first Scottish witches' sabbath.

THE WITCHING HOUR APPROACHES

Although the North Berwick witches were ultimately directed by leading questions and elite ideas about the crime of witchcraft and, more specifically, the role of the witches' sabbath in that crime, this did not mean the witches had no role in the formulation of the descriptions of the witches' sabbath. After all, the witches had to devise answers to the interrogators' questions and this gave the accused witches an opportunity to weave their own beliefs and traditions into the framework dictated by the elite interrogators.

The phrase 'witching hour' is one that many individuals will undoubtedly be familiar with. It has been defined as the time that witches meet, usually believed to be midnight.⁶⁴ This definition is based on an allusion from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, composed around 1600. Shakespeare refers to 'the witching time of night' which, in *Hamlet*, was midnight.⁶⁵ However, the phrase 'witching hour' may not always have carried such a narrow definition. In many cases, the phrase refers only to the time that witches and supernatural beings are active. Although the specific time may alter over the course of time or space, the belief that there was such a time as the

'witching hour' seems to have been widespread. There is certainly nothing specific to Scotland about the phrase 'witching hour', and none of the Scottish witches refer to the phrase itself during their confessions. But, based on its broad definition, Scottish witches seem to have had some strong beliefs about when the 'witching hour' took place.

Many of the Scottish witches who confessed to attending a witches' sabbath were very exact when it came to describing the times at which these gatherings took place. A full statistical analysis could not be carried out on these occurrences, owing to the time constraints of this particular project. However, with close analysis of confessions and dittays, a general picture soon becomes apparent, and indicates that the times and dates the witches' sabbaths were said to have taken place were highly significant in terms of their importance within popular beliefs about calendar customs, magic, fairies and the supernatural. The most frequently mentioned dates upon which the witches' sabbath was said to have taken place include Candlemas, Beltane, Rood Day (Holy Cross Day), Lammas, Hallow-even, Andrewmas, Whitsunday, Pasche (Easter), and the harvest and seed-times. All of these dates had special significance within the Scottish calendar, whether they were part of religious celebrations or more secular in nature.

On many occasions, the reformed Kirk tried, more often than not in vain, to curb these traditional celebrations, and any celebration that might have been deemed superstitious came under attack.⁶⁶ However, it was precisely the Kirk's determination to curb these festivities that has left the evidence to show that many of these celebrations were still widely observed in Early Modern Scotland. Many 16th- and 17th-century presbytery records convey the

64 Christine Ammer, 'witching hour', in *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms* – <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/witching+hour>, accessed June 2011.

65 William Shakespeare, 'The Tragical History of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark', in *Hamlet* (ed) Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London, 2006), p 324

66 Margo Todd, 'Profane Pastimes and the Reformed Community: The Persistence of Popular Festivities in Early Modern Scotland', *Journal of British Studies* 39:2 (April, 2000), pp 123–56.

kirk sessions' failing attempts to eradicate their local parishioners' persistent honouring of these traditional times of festivity.⁶⁷ Bonfires were still lit at Midsummer and Halloween, and Yule carols continued to be sung throughout Aberdeen in the early 17th century.⁶⁸ Many of the offenders were identified and brought before the kirk session to repent of their actions, and some were even punished with fines or public penance.⁶⁹ The resistance with which the people of Scotland met the reformed Kirk's repression of these festivities highlights the determination with which they clung to their traditions.

Some of the dates named by the confessing witches were, or had previously been, important times within the Christian calendar. Saints' days, including Andrewmas and Michaelmas, were mentioned alongside Whitsunday and Pasche by a handful of confessing witches. In 1649, Agnes Hunter from Penston, confessed that she had attended a number of meetings with the devil, including one on Fastern's Eve and another at Pasche time.⁷⁰ A number of other witches, including the cunning man, Patrick Lowrie, claimed to have attended a meeting on Whitsunday.⁷¹ Perhaps these days and their association with miracles, transformation and rebirth captured the imaginations of the confessing witches. There is also the possibility, however, that the witches recognised these Christian celebrations for their association with magic and healing practices, as these were days that were often identified by charmers as the days upon which healing rituals would be especially effective.

The most notable dates upon which the witches were believed to attend their meetings,

and which consistently feature in the Scottish witches' confessions, are the Quarter Days. The Quarter Days in Scotland included Candlemas, Beltane or – in some cases, Rood Day – Lammas, and Halloween, and each of these four days had their own special significance for the people of Scotland.⁷² Candlemas was a traditional celebration, held on or around 2 February, that was said to have its roots in the celebration of the Purification of the Virgin Mary. In Scotland it also had the dual purpose of celebrating the official coming of spring and the return of light.⁷³ On Candlemas, prior to the Reformation, individuals brought candles to their local clergymen to be blessed. These candles could then be left as a gift to the Virgin Mary, or taken home to be used in times of illness or danger.⁷⁴ After the Reformation, the Kirk began a campaign against this tradition as the blessing of candles was viewed as a superstitious act and, at times, interpreted as idolatrous by particularly zealous clergy.⁷⁵ However, despite the condemnations of the reformed Kirk, these celebrations still held a place in the beliefs and imaginations of the people of Scotland. Indeed, in 1661, Issobell Smyth, from Pilmore in Haddington, confessed to participating in a procession with witches who carried candles from Cadger Well to Saltoun, a ritual very reminiscent of the Candlemas celebrations.⁷⁶

Beltane celebrated the coming of summer and was one of the most important ancient Celtic celebrations. Beltane was usually celebrated on 1 May, when bonfires were lit at dawn to celebrate and welcome the return of the sun and its accompanied fertility.⁷⁷ In 1659, Agnes Cairnes from Kirkcudbright, claimed to have

67 Margo Todd, *Journal of British Studies* 39:2, pp 123–56.

68 *Ibid.*, p 126.

69 *Ibid.*, p 129.

70 J H Burton et al (eds), *The Register of the Privy Council of Scotland*, 38 vols (Edinburgh, 1877–) [hereafter *RPC*], 2nd ser, vol 8, pp 191–2.

71 Robert Pitcairn (ed), *Criminal Trials in Scotland, 1488–1624*, 3 vols (Edinburgh, 1833), vol 2, pp 477–9.

72 Joseph Anderson (ed), 'The confessions of the Forfar Witches (1661)', in *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 22 (1887–8), p 256.

73 Hutton, Ronald, *The Stations of the Sun: a History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford, 2001), pp 139–45.

74 *Ibid.*

75 *Ibid.*

76 *RPC*, 3rd ser, vol 1, p 650.

77 Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun*, pp 218–25.

danced around a fire with fairies on Beltane.⁷⁸ Similarly, in June 1661, Jonet Watsone confessed to attending a witches' meeting at Newtown Deinhead Dam, in a river valley a mile or so from Dalkeith, at Beltane.⁷⁹ The witches' confessions suggest that Beltane was considered to be a time closely connected with witchcraft and the supernatural.

Lammas was celebrated on 1 August and traditionally was a celebration of the beginning of the harvest period.⁸⁰ This time of year would have held particular importance for the people of Scotland who relied heavily upon an abundant harvest to see them through the coming winter and to provide seeds for the year ahead. With a diet based heavily on cereal crops, particularly oats and bere, it is unsurprising that the harvest period was welcomed with open arms. Without a successful harvest, many families would face starvation, or would be forced to beg for alms from their more prosperous neighbours. Lammas itself was mentioned by a number of witches in relation to meetings that they had attended. Helen Simbeard, from Haddington, confessed to attending a witches' gathering at the 'Old Kirk' at Lammas in 1659.⁸¹ Indeed, the importance of Lammas as a time for magic and witchcraft was present in the popular imagination as early as the North Berwick witch-hunt of 1590. Some of the North Berwick witches confessed to attending a meeting at Acheson's Haven (New Haven) on Lammas Eve 1590, and it was at this meeting that a wax image of the king was made and passed around by the witches present at the convention.⁸² In the minds of the accused witches, there was a close connection between Lammas and the practice of witchcraft and magic.

The final Scottish Quarter Day is Hallowmas or Halloween. Halloween was based on the ancient Celtic celebration day known as Samhain, or Samhuinn, which, along with Beltane, was the most important celebration of the Celtic calendar.⁸³ Halloween marked the entry into winter and the coming of darkness and decay, and in a ritual very reminiscent of the Beltane celebrations, bonfires would have been lit to ward off the darkness and hasten the return of the sun.⁸⁴ Halloween was the date upon which the witches of North Berwick were said to have gathered at North Berwick Kirk for their meeting with the devil.⁸⁵ Later, in 1597, the witches of Aberdeen followed suit by holding their own Halloween convention in the town's Mercat Cross.⁸⁶ The Bute witch, Margaret McWilliam, similarly claimed that the witches of Bute danced together on the Hill of Kilmory around Hallowday.⁸⁷

The Quarter Days held special significance in the minds of confessing witches as, combined, they are by far the most frequently mentioned dates in the Scottish witches' confessions. Indeed, Isobel Smith of Forfar claimed she met with the devil every 'quarter at Candlemas, Rooday, Lambsmas, Hallow[mas]'.⁸⁸ Likewise, the Nairnshire witch, Isobel Gowdie, claimed her coven met for grand meetings at the end of each quarter.⁸⁹ The assertion that Quarter Days were the days upon which the witches' sabbath would have been held appears to have been widely accepted by the Scottish witches. The relationship between the Quarter Days and the witches' sabbath, however, are more complicated than first appearances would indicate. Although the interrogators are unlikely

78 Julian Goodare, Lauren Martin, Joyce Millar, Louise Yeoman 'The Survey of Scottish Witchcraft' [hereafter SSW], <http://www.shca.ed.ac.uk/witches/> (Archived January 2003).

79 Robert Pitcairn (ed), *Criminal Trials in Scotland, 1488–1624*, 3 vols, (Edinburgh, 1833), vol 3, p 601.

80 Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun*, pp 327–31.

81 SSW.

82 Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*, p 214.

83 Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun*, pp 360–70.

84 Ibid.

85 Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*, p 314.

86 *Spalding Misc*, vol 1, p 97.

87 J R N MacPhail (ed), Papers relating to witchcraft, 1662–1677', in *Highland Papers*, 4 vols (Edinburgh, 1914–34), vol 3, p 19.

88 Anderson, 'The confessions of the Forfar Witches (1661)', p 256.

89 Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, p 42.

to have been surprised that confessing witches would consistently refer to the Quarter Days in their confessions, it is doubtful the interrogators themselves would attempt to force the witches to mention specific dates. Unlike encouraging witches to confess to entering a demonic pact, the interrogators would have nothing to gain directly from framing questions that would encourage witches to name the Quarter Days. A witches' sabbath held on an unspecified date would still be more than enough to condemn the witches in question. If the witches were not encouraged to name the Quarter Days by the interrogators then it is safe to suggest that their incorporation into the witches' confessions was influenced by popular belief. Therefore, the witches were drawing on popular belief about the nature of the Quarter Days, and their pre-existing connections with the supernatural, magic and fairies, to elaborate on their descriptions of the witches' sabbath. Like the witches who drew on popular belief about fairies when asked to describe the devil, some witches were drawing on popular belief about the Quarter Days to construct believable descriptions of the witches' sabbath.

The most important connection between the four Quarter Days was the celebration of the duality of life and death.⁹⁰ This celebration did not necessarily refer to the life and death of human beings but also the life and death, caused by the changing seasons, brought to the crops, plants and animals upon which the people of Scotland relied. During the Early Modern period it was widely believed that on the Quarter Days the normal order of the world was reversed, and the supernatural world began to encroach upon Middle Earth. Many believed that the Quarter Days were specifically associated with the supernatural and were the times at which supernatural beings and the souls of the dead could pass through boundaries and return to the human world.⁹¹ This fear reflected a belief that

individuals and their families, homes and animals could be harmed by supernatural beings on these days. Robert Kirk, minister of Aberfoyle and author of *The Secret Commonwealth*, claimed that it was this fear that led to a particularly high attendance at the church service held on the first Sunday after the Quarter Days. In fact, he claimed that the only services many of his parishioners attended were those around the Quarter Days, which, he suggests, was primarily an attempt to protect themselves from the hostility of the fairies and any other malignant supernatural being that may have borne them a grudge.⁹²

In popular imagination, the fairies, the dead and other spirits could cross the boundaries between the other world and Middle Earth on the Quarter Days, and this would have encouraged the belief that these were the most probable days for witches to meet with fairies or the devil.⁹³ Indeed, Elspeth Reoch from Orkney, named Halloween as a time at which the devil would visit her.⁹⁴ Similarly, Andro Man, a cunning man accused of witchcraft, claimed to have met with the Queen of Elphen and the fairy court at Rood Day in harvest, and stated that his next convention was due to be held on Halloween.⁹⁵ This belief that the fairy court was abroad on Halloween was also held by Janet Boyman, who witnessed the fairy court riding by in 1572 while at Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh.⁹⁶ Four years later, in 1576, Bessie Dunlop claimed that she met with the ghost of her dead relative, Thom Reid, on the morning after Candlemas.⁹⁷

The Quarter Days also held special importance for individuals with intentions of casting magical enchantments. Despite

90 Lizanne Henderson and Edward J Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (Edinburgh, 2007), p 82.

91 *Ibid*, pp 82–3.

92 Michael Hunter, *The Occult Laboratory* (Woodbridge, 2001), p 80.

93 Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, p 82.

94 Gordon Donaldson, *Court Book of Shetland, 1615–1629* (Lerwick, 1991), pp 38–41.

95 *Spalding Misc*, vol 1, pp 117–25.

96 NRS, JC26/1/67 – Trial of Janet Boyman. I am grateful to Julian Goodare for providing me with a transcription of this document.

97 Pitcairn (ed), *Trials*, vol 1, pp 49–58.

objections from the reformed Kirk many individuals continued to make pilgrimages to holy wells on the Quarter Days, when the magical healing power of the well's waters were believed to be at their most potent.⁹⁸ Indeed, all kinds of divination and magical rituals were believed to have particularly high levels of success on these days. During his tour of the Western Islands of Scotland, in around 1695, Martin Martin discovered surviving popular belief in fairy changelings. Some individuals believed that a new mother and child had to be protected from fairies and evil spirits by carrying a ring of fire around them. This protection was extremely important as the mother and child were not considered to be under the protection of the church until they had visited the church and the child had been baptised. However, if parents suspected their child had been taken by the fairies and replaced with a fairy stock or changeling, a ritual could be performed to rescue their child from Fairyland. On the next Quarter Day, the parents would dig an open grave in which the fairy changeling would be placed. If the ritual was successful, the human child would wait in place of the changeling the next morning.⁹⁹

This belief that the Quarter Days were particularly important for performing successful charms or healing rituals was certainly present among the witches who had a background in healing. Agnes Sampson, a cunning woman who became embroiled in the North Berwick witch-hunt, was said to have healed the sheriff of Haddington's wife on Halloween.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, the healer Elspet Strachund from Warthill, performed a healing ritual with burning coal on Halloween.¹⁰¹ The Dumfriesshire witch, Bessie Paine, performed her healing rituals on Candlemas.¹⁰² Likewise, the charmer, John

Dougall, instructed one of his clients to perform a ritual while sowing his seeds on Beltane day.¹⁰³

The special significance held by the Quarter Days is also clear from contemporary popular ballads and poems. In a number of popular ballads concerning fairy belief. Beltane and Halloween were mentioned specifically as the days on which souls could cross from one world to another. In *Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight* a fairy appears on the 'first morning of May', a clear reference to Beltane.¹⁰⁴ In both *Tam Lin* and *Allison Gross* Halloween was the date at which the boundaries between Middle Earth and the other world were most permeable. Tam Lin was rescued from his incarceration in fairyland on this date; whilst Allison Gross noted the 'seely (fairy) court' riding by on Halloween.¹⁰⁵ Some of the accused witches almost certainly drew inspiration for their confessions from popular beliefs captured in these ballads. In his 1598 confession, Andro Man actually claimed to have met Thomas Rhymer, and his description of his travels to Fairyland with the Queen of Elphen bears some resemblance to Thomas Rhymer's story.¹⁰⁶ Ballads are, of course, notoriously difficult to date; however, they are often much older than the first written record of their existence would indicate. Ballads can survive for hundreds of years through oral tradition and these references to the Quarter Days as moments when two worlds can collide are also likely to be of some age.¹⁰⁷

This belief in the magical roots of the Quarter Days was not confined to the ballads told by the lower classes at the fireside. Supernatural tales of witches, fairies and werewolves appear to have been much anticipated entertainment for the king's court and the educated elites. Alexander Montgomerie twice referred to Halloween during his flying with Polwart, which has been dated to

98 Lizanne Henderson, 'Charmers, Spells and Holy Wells: The Repackaging of Belief', *Review of Scottish Culture*, 19 (April, 2007), pp 14–15.

99 Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, p 97.

100 Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*, p 234.

101 *Spalding Misc*, vol 1, pp 189–192.

102 SSW.

103 SSW.

104 Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, p 81.

105 Ibid. In this context 'seely' is a reference to fairies.

106 *Spalding Misc*, vol 1, pp 117–25.

107 Edward J Cowan, *The Ballad in Scottish History* (East Linton, 2000).

c 1580.¹⁰⁸ It has been suggested by a number of literary scholars, including Bawcutt and Riddy, that this flyting, essentially a dramatic verse-quarrel between two poets, would probably have been performed before James VI's court to entertain his guests.¹⁰⁹ There is strong evidence that James VI had heard or read Montgomerie's flyting with Polwart as he quoted from it on at least two occasions, and even referred to Montgomerie as 'the prince of Poets in our land'.¹¹⁰ Therefore, having heard this poem and having a familiarity with the supernatural dangers associated with Halloween, it would have come as no surprise to the king that the witches of North Berwick were said to have held their notorious convention at North Berwick Kirk on this night. The poem itself is a treasure-trove of popular belief in the supernatural, and reminds us that the educated elites would have shared at least some of their beliefs with the less educated majority. This poem, and others including Robert Sempill's satirical poem featuring a Scottish witch and Patrick Adamson, Archbishop of St Andrews, demonstrates that as early as 1580, the Quarter Days, and more specifically Halloween, were inextricably bound with witchcraft and the supernatural, and that these beliefs were well established long before major witch-hunts gripped Scotland.¹¹¹

The date was not the only important factor for witches to consider when devising accounts of the witches' sabbath. Equally important for the confessing witches were the times at which the witches' gatherings took place. Not all witches who confessed to attending the witches' sabbath mentioned a specific time at which they did so; however, the confessions of those who did leave

an intriguing clue to the importance of specific times in the minds of the confessing witches. As one might expect, the stroke of midnight proved to be an important time for witches to gather. Christen Mitchell, Isobel Cockie and Thomas Leyis, from Aberdeen, claimed that the witches' gathering that was alleged to have taken place at Fish Market Cross in Aberdeen occurred at twelve midnight.¹¹² Earlier, at a witches' sabbath alleged to have taken place in 1589, Agnes Sampson claimed that the North Berwick witches met at 'Hours at even' in the kirk-yard of North Berwick.¹¹³ Similarly, in 1662, the Crook of Devon witch, Margaret Huggon, claimed to have met with the devil before midnight upon the hill where the gallows stood, due east of Crook of Devon.¹¹⁴ The Forfar witch, Helen Guthrie claimed that she attended a witches' gathering in the churchyard of Forfar at midnight,¹¹⁵ while Guthrie's daughter, Janet Huit, claimed that on a separate occasion her mother had carnal copulation with the devil upon Newman Hill in Forfar, at midnight.¹¹⁶

Like Helen Guthrie, some witches met individually with the devil at midnight, including Margaret Dickson from Penston in Haddington, who claimed the devil appeared to her in the likeness of a gentleman in green clothes at midnight.¹¹⁷ Like many other witches, Margaret Dickson seems to have been drawing on popular belief about fairies to answer her interrogators' questions about the devil. Midnight was also the time at which Janet, the heroine of *Tam Lin*, was instructed to go and rescue her lover from the fairy court.¹¹⁸ The Ayrshire witch, Bessie Dunlop, claimed that she met Thom Reid, her

108 Alexander Montgomerie in Priscilla J Bawcutt, Felicity Riddy and Thomas Crawford, *Longer Scottish Poems* (Edinburgh, 1987), pp 279–80.

109 Ibid.

110 Ibid.

111 Sempill, Robert, 'Heir Followis the Legend of the Bishop of St Androis Lyfe, Callit Mr Patrik Adamson, alias Cousteane' in *Satirical Poems of the Time of the Reformation* (ed) James Cranstoun, 2 vols *Scottish Text Society* (Edinburgh, 1891), vol 1, p 362.

112 *Spalding Misc*, vol 1, pp 154–65; *Spalding Misc*, vol 1, pp 114–15; *Spalding Misc*, vol 1, p 97.

113 Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*, p 147.

114 R Begg Burns (ed), 'Notice of trials for witchcraft at Crook of Devon, Kinross-shire, in 1662', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, vol 22 (1887–8), p 234.

115 Ibid, pp 252–5.

116 Ibid, pp 245–62.

117 Ibid, pp 191–2.

118 Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, p 91.

spirit guide and the ghost of her dead relative who resided in Fairyland, at midday.¹¹⁹ There was a clear association between ‘the hours at even’, and supernatural spirits including the dead, fairies and, in the cases of many witches, the devil.¹²⁰ With pre-existing popular belief in fairies and their practices, it is unsurprising that confessing witches would draw upon this knowledge to describe the witches’ sabbaths they had attended.

The vast majority of witches’ sabbaths took place during the hours of darkness. Some witches commenced their meetings at the gloaming or twilight, including Agnes Clarkson, who claimed to have met with a group of witches to dance upon the Green of Dirlerton at twilight in 1649.¹²¹ Similarly, the North Berwick witches claimed to have attended a meeting on Lammas Eve, 1589, at Acheson’s Haven, which commenced at the gloaming so that the witches could carry out their business by night.¹²² The Nairnshire witch, Isobel Gowdie, claimed that she attended a night-time meeting at the Kirk of Auldearn.¹²³ Likewise, Bessie Thom from Aberdeen claimed to have attended a meeting on Rood Day, early in the morning before sunrise.¹²⁴ Indeed, according to the witches’ confessions, the vast majority of witches’ meetings were carried out under the cover of darkness.

It was not only witches who were believed to commune during the dark hours of night. The vagabond, Donald McIlmichall, who was tried before the Justice Court of Inveraray was convicted of theft and consulting with evil spirits in 1677. McIlmichall described a night-time meeting that he stumbled upon during his travels from Ardtur to Glackiriska in Appin. He claimed to have seen a light coming from inside the hillside and went forth to investigate. Upon

entering the hillside, he witnessed many men and women dancing under candlelight. When questioned about the identity of these men and women, McIlmichall stated that he believed them to be ‘not wordlie men or men ordayned of god’.¹²⁵ Historians thus far have been unable to agree about the identity of the men and women in question; suggestions include witches, fairies and even human beings attending an outdoor religious conventicle.¹²⁶ However, wherever the truth to this question lies, Donald McIlmichall believed that the cover of darkness was necessary for these beings to convene.

There also seems to have been a magical connection between the hours of darkness and the hours of light. This magical connection was particularly applicable at the boundaries between the light and darkness. Elspeth Reoch, from Kirkwall in Orkney, claimed to have met a ‘blak man’ named Johne Stewart who became her spirit guide. Reoch claimed that Johne Stewart had been slain at the ‘doun going of the soone’, a reference to sunset and, as a result of this misfortune, he became trapped between heaven and earth.¹²⁷ This appears to reflect a general belief that those who died suddenly or prematurely became confined to fairyland.¹²⁸ However, this may also be a reference to the weakening of the boundaries between Middle Earth and the other world that was believed to occur at sunset. Johne Stewart met the boundary between life and death upon the boundary between Middle Earth and the other world, which left him in a liminal state, condemned to travel between two worlds.

These magical boundaries also proved to be important features of many folk healers’ rituals. Marjorie Wingate was brought before the kirk session of St Ninian’s in Stirling for the offence of collecting water from a well before sunrise.¹²⁹

119 Pitcairn (ed), *Trials*, vol 1, pp 49–58.

120 *Ibid.*, p 83.

121 *RPC*, 2nd ser, vol 8, pp 189–90.

122 Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*, p 38.

123 Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, p 13.

124 *Spalding Misc.*, vol 1, pp 166–7.

125 Macphail (ed), *Highland Papers*, vol 3, pp 86–8.

126 SSW.

127 Donaldson, *Court Book of Shetland*, pp 38–41.

128 The Ayrshire witch Bessie Dunlop’s spirit-guide Thom Reid died prematurely and henceforth lived in Fairyland. Pitcairn (ed), *Trials*, vol 1, pp 49–58.

Similarly, Andrew Aitken informed George Syme that he could obtain a cure for his illness if he obtained water before daybreak.¹³⁰ Katherine Craigie from Orkney employed a ritual with hot stones in order to cure the husband of Janet Craigie, which involved placing the hot stones under the threshold of the door before sunset and removing them again before sunrise. By placing these stones in water she was able to identify the spirit that troubled Janet Craigie's husband and suggest a cure.¹³¹

Popular belief in the importance of boundaries, whether they were specific time boundaries including midnight and midday, or the boundaries between light and dark, appear to have had a bearing on witches' confessions. There is a definite association between important calendar dates, whether religious or secular, and the dates claimed by witches to be the ones upon which they attended the witches' sabbath. Witches, like fairies, seem to have had a natural inclination towards festivity, whether religious or secular. The Scottish witches were clearly drawing on pre-existing popular beliefs about the magical importance of specific temporal boundaries to engage with the interrogators' questions about the witches' sabbath. Some Scottish witches specifically mentioned fairies in their confessions, while others, despite no direct references to fairies, were drawing on fairy lore. Some of the witches, like Agnes Sampson, were also folk healers, while others were likely to have engaged the services of a folk healer at one time or another and, as such, would have been aware of the importance of magical boundaries in healing rituals. With magical rituals and supernatural beings so closely associated with these specific temporal boundaries, the witches may well have believed that these would be the

perfect times to meet with the devil, and in some cases, to perform maleficent magic.

Whilst the interrogator might have enquired about the times and dates that the witches' meetings took place, it is unlikely that they would have attempted to guide the witch's answer to a specific date or time, unless there was a reason to do so. Some interrogators may have forced witches to mention specific times or dates to ensure continuity between the confession of the accused witch and those of her supposed accomplices. However, in the majority of cases discussed in this research, the witches were responding to the interrogators' questions based on their own knowledge and beliefs. This process provided the witch with an opportunity to incorporate some of their own ideas and beliefs into their confessions, which we observe in the form of specific calendar customs and times that were blended almost seamlessly into their narratives. Although the contents of these confessions may not reflect a popular belief specific to the witches' sabbath, it certainly displays the formulation of the beliefs that became inextricably bound up with the concept of the witches' sabbath.

THE WITCHES' PLACE

The locations chosen by Scottish witches for the witches' sabbath are an important indicator of the witches' understanding of the crime of which they were accused. A location was mentioned in the majority of cases in which the witches confessed to attending a witches' meeting. From the point of view of the interrogators, it appears that the minimum requirement from witches who described a witches' sabbath was to name a location and to name the other witches who were in attendance at the meeting. Although the witches were likely to have been prompted to confess to these two points, it is equally likely that the selection of particular locations would indicate the role of these places in the world vision and mindset of the witches in question.

129 Joyce Miller, 'Folk healing aspects of witchcraft', in *Witchcraft and Belief* (ed) Goodare, Martin and Miller, p 102.

130 *Ibid.*

131 Owen Davies, 'A Comparative Perspective on Scottish Cunning-Folk and Charmers', in *Witchcraft and Belief* (ed) Goodare, Martin and Miller, p 197.

In most of the cases analysed during this research, the witches claimed to have met within the boundaries of their own presbytery, and the farthest they seem to have been prepared to venture was to their closest large town. Most of the witches, whether they were referring to the witches' sabbath or to other places they claimed to have visited during their time as a witch, named real, easily accessible local places. These real locations could be easily plotted on contemporary landscapes, and were, most probably, places that the witches had seen and visited. However, in some cases, these real locations might represent something quite different in the minds of the witches.

For witches throughout Scotland, churches and churchyards proved to be popular locations to gather together with the devil. Probably the most famous witches' sabbath in Scottish history was said to have been held within the church and churchyard of North Berwick.¹³² Later, in 1605, Patrik Lowrie, from Halie in Ayrshire, confessed to attending gatherings at 'diverse kirks and kirkyards' with his associates.¹³³ In 1643, the cunning man, John Burgh from Fossoway, claimed to have attended a meeting that took place in the kirkyard of Glendevon.¹³⁴ One year later, in 1644, the witch, Margaret Watson from Carnwath claimed to have attended a number of gatherings that took place in the High Kirk of Lanark and the Kirk of Carnwath.¹³⁵ Later, in 1662, the infamous Scottish witch, Isobel Gowdie, claimed to have attended meetings in the Kirk of Auldearn and the kirkyard of Nairn.¹³⁶ Clearly, some witches believed that the church and churchyard were a believable and appropriate place for witches to congregate.

On some occasions, witches named central locations within their town, presbytery or parish as the site of the witches' sabbath. In 1597, the

witches of Aberdeen named the Fish Market Cross as the location for the most notable of their witches' sabbaths.¹³⁷ Similarly, the Forfar witches also mentioned a number of other key locations within their settlement as those that had hosted a witches' sabbath. In her confession on 2 January 1662, Isobel Smith claimed that she had attended a meeting at the Playfield of Forfar.¹³⁸ Katherine Portour claimed to have attended numerous meetings with the Forfar witches, including one on the Bleaching Green in the centre of Forfar.¹³⁹ Interestingly, despite the attention a noisy witches' dance should have attracted, no witnesses came forward to confirm any of the Forfar witches' confessions.

There is little evidence to suggest that people were afraid to testify against suspected witches, although external witnesses who testified to observing a witches' sabbath were extremely rare. James Kempt from Aberdeen, claimed to have seen a group of women dancing together in the company of a small black dog, outside a neighbour's door. This evidence was brought to the Aberdeen kirk session's attention in 1609, during a slander case against James Kempt. The women accused by Kempt claimed that they had met legitimately to divide fish they had caught that day. On this occasion, the women's good reputations and their husbands' support saved them from facing a witchcraft trial. Kempt lost the slander case and was forced to publicly apologise and ask for forgiveness before the church congregation.¹⁴⁰ Similarly, Andrew Patrick from Cupar, claimed that he had seen seven or eight women dancing 'with a meckle man in the midst of them'.¹⁴¹ These

132 Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*, p 314.

133 Pitcairn (ed), *Trials*, vol 2, pp 477–9.

134 Gillon and Smith, *Selected Justiciary Cases*, vol 3, pp 576–602.

135 *RPC*, 2nd ser, vol 8, pp 146–54.

136 Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, p 39.

137 *Spalding Misc*, vol 1, p 97.

138 *Ibid*, p 256.

139 *Ibid*, p 251.

140 John Stuart (ed), *Selections from the records of the Kirk Session, Presbytery, and Synod of Aberdeen* (Spalding Club, Aberdeen, 1846), pp 70–3. I am grateful to Michael Wasser for this reference

141 Stuart Macdonald, 'In search of the Devil in Fife witchcraft cases, 1560–1705', in *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context* (ed) Julian Goodare (Manchester, 2002), pp 33–4.

men were aware of the type of accusation that might insinuate that individuals had engaged in the witches' sabbath. However, in general, neighbours' testimonies prove that they had little concern for witches' meetings.

Often witches would name the homes and yards of fellow witches or acquaintances as the locations for their gatherings. In 1597, the Aberdeen witch, Bessie Thom, claimed to have attended a meeting on St Katherine's Hill, in Aberdeen, in the yard of James Thomson.¹⁴² Later, in 1649, Agnes Hunter from Penston in Haddington, claimed that she had attended a witches' meeting in Longniddry, in Thomas Dickson's house.¹⁴³ In 1661, Helen Guthrie from Forfar, claimed that she had attended a meeting in her fellow witch Mary Rhynd's house.¹⁴⁴ Although some witches clearly favoured the convenience of the homes and yards of their fellow witches or neighbours, most witches named much more remote locations for the witches' sabbath. These locations varied considerably from hills and moors to lochs and wells. Sometimes these locations were highly significant within the local topography, or in some cases, played other memorable roles within local beliefs and traditions.

There were many witches who claimed to have held their gatherings on the hills around their local area. In 1662, the Crook of Devon witches claimed to have held a witches' meeting on 'Gibson's Craig', a hill crowned by a rocky outcrop, approximately three miles from Crook of Devon.¹⁴⁵ Gibson's Craig no longer exists on modern maps, but the *Roy Military Survey of Scotland*, which took place over eight years from 1747 to 1755, recorded its location.¹⁴⁶ Gibson's Craig, or Cult Hill

as it is known in modern Ordnance Survey maps, rises to approximately 240m above sea level. The hill is also home to what is believed by archaeologists to have been an Iron Age fort, which sat upon the craggy outcrop at the summit of the hill. In the fairly low-lying local landscape, this location clearly stood out to the witches as a place of importance.

In 1597, the witches of Aberdeen claimed to have danced around a great stone at the Hill of Craiglich.¹⁴⁷ In 1662, the witches of Bute were said to have danced together on the Hill of Kilmory, which overlooked the waters of Loch Fad.¹⁴⁸ Janet Huit, daughter of Forfar witch Helen Guthrie, claimed to have accompanied her mother to a meeting with the devil that took place on Newman Hill.¹⁴⁹ Later, in 1662, Isobel Gowdie claimed that while her coven met at Meikle-Burn, another coven met at the same time in the Downie Hills.¹⁵⁰ In some cases, it is likely that the witches were drawing on beliefs and associations that had already become attached to those locations in the popular imagination.

These beliefs and traditions might have related to the past and present purposes attached to particular hills, or perhaps to a more generalised belief relating to fairies and the supernatural. In some of the cases, the hills where the gallows stood seem to have held an importance for confessing witches. Margaret Huggon, from Crook of Devon, in her confession, indicated this would be an appropriate place to meet the devil.¹⁵¹ Gallows were often located on the outskirts of settlements, to demonstrate the criminals' position outwith society. The importance of boundaries, and the remote position of the witches as outcasts from their communities, would have made the gallows an appropriate site, in the minds of the accused, for witches

142 *Spalding Misc*, vol 1, p 167

143 *RPC*, 2nd ser, vol 8, pp 190–1.

144 Anderson, 'The confessions of the Forfar Witches (1661)', pp 252–5.

145 Begg Burns, 'Notice for Trials for Witchcraft at Crook of Devon, Kinross-shire, in 1662', p 219.

146 William Roy, *Roy Military Survey of Scotland, 1747–1755* – (<http://geo.nls.uk/roy-highlands/>)

147 *Spalding Misc*, vol 1, pp 152–3.

148 MacPhail (ed), *Highland Papers*, vol 3, p 19.

149 Anderson, 'The confessions of the Forfar Witches (1661)', pp 245–62.

150 Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, p 39.

151 Begg Burns, 'Notice for Trials for Witchcraft at Crook of Devon, Kinross-shire, in 1662', p 234.

to gather. The ancient remains of their distant ancestors might also have inspired the witches of Aberdeen and Crook of Devon to mention the sites where ancient standing stones and forts once stood.¹⁵² The local communities who lived in the areas surrounding these landmarks would have been curious about the significance of these monuments, or possibly believed they had magical qualities. However, in most cases, it was not only the monuments and objects that occupied the hills that made them appropriate locations for the witches' sabbath, but the beliefs associated with the hills themselves.

Despite the topographical significance held by hills within the local landscape, the witches might also have been drawing on traditional beliefs that fairies and supernatural spirits met both inside and outside of hills to carry out their festivities. These beliefs featured in numerous witches' confessions, with some of the witches claiming to have seen and attended these gatherings. Janet Boyman from Edinburgh, claimed, in 1572, that she witnessed the fairy court riding at Arthur's Seat.¹⁵³ In 1615, Janet Drever from Orkney, confessed to 'fostering a bairne in the hill of Westray to the fairy folk, callit of hir our guid nichbouris'.¹⁵⁴ Later, in 1616, the witch Katherine Jonesdochter from Shetland, claimed to have seen the trowis – nature spirits similar to fairies – at a hill called Greinfaill.¹⁵⁵ In 1623, Issobell Haldane from Perth, claimed that she was carried from her own bed to a hillside where she spent four days with the fairies before being carried out again by a man with a grey beard.¹⁵⁶ In 1662, Isobel Gowdie claimed that she attended a fairy gathering in the Downie Hills, a well-known fairy haunt.¹⁵⁷ Once again, it is evident that

some witches were drawing on pre-existing fairy beliefs to construct their descriptions of the witches' sabbath.

Many witches also mentioned locations near to bodies of water, including ports, boats, lochs, rivers and burns. In 1644 Christiane Melvill from the parish of Abercorn claimed to have met with the devil and another witch, Helen Hill, at Swynisburne.¹⁵⁸ The accused witch Isobel Murray, claimed she attended a meeting held at Penston Loch.¹⁵⁹ Isobel Smyth similarly claimed, in her 1661 confession, that she met with witches who convened together at Cadger's Well, near Penston.¹⁶⁰ Janet Huit from Forfar, claimed to have been transported to a witches' meeting held on an island in the Loch of Forfar.¹⁶¹ Similarly, the Bute witch, Margaret McLevine, claimed she attended a meeting at Loch Fyne to plan an attack on the local minister.¹⁶² Ports were also a popular choice for many witches to meet, but these confessions usually indicate that the witches in question had the intention of casting malicious charms against boats and ships. The North Berwick witches apparently met at Acheson's Haven in 1590 with the intention of sinking the ship the 'Grace of God'.¹⁶³ The Forfar witch Helen Guthrie also claimed to have travelled to the coastal settlement of Barry to meet with another two witches, and together they planned to sink a boat that was docked there.¹⁶⁴ This suggests the Scottish witches had reason to believe that bodies of water were suitable places for witches to gather.

Although there are fairly obvious reasons why some witches claimed to have held their gatherings in the immediate vicinity of water, most notably in the cases when the witches claimed to have carried out supernatural attacks

152 *Spalding Misc*, vol 1, pp 152–3; Begg Burns, 'Notice for Trials for Witchcraft at Crook of Devon, Kinross-shire, in 1662', p 219.

153 NRS, JC26/1/67 – Trial of Janet Boyman.

154 Robert S Barclay, *The Court Books of Orkney and Shetland, 1614–1615* (Edinburgh, 1967), pp 18–20.

155 Donaldson, *Court Book of Shetland*, pp 38–41.

156 *RPC*, 2nd ser, vol 8, pp 352–4.

157 Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, p 40.

158 *RPC*, 2nd ser, vol 8, p 110.

159 *Ibid*.

160 *RPC*, 3rd ser, vol 1, p 650.

161 Anderson, 'The confessions of the Forfar Witches (1661)', pp 247–8.

162 MacPhail (ed), *Highland Papers*, vol 3, pp 9–10.

163 Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*, p 147.

164 Anderson, 'The confessions of the Forfar Witches (1661)', pp 252–5.

on seafaring vessels, there is still reason to believe that these places carried supernatural associations of their own. Fairies were often associated with bodies of water and had a particular fondness for lochs and wells. Based on the association between fairies and water, it is possible to speculate that the witches were drawing on these beliefs while describing their version of the witches' sabbath. The convicted witch, Bessie Dunlop from Ayrshire, claimed to have witnessed what appears to be the fairy court riding at Restalrig Loch, near Edinburgh.¹⁶⁵ In 1598, the cunning man, Andro Man from Aberdeen, claimed to have met the Queen of Elphen and her court at the Bin Loch.¹⁶⁶ Furthermore, Elspeth Reoch from Orkney claimed, in her 1616 confession, she had encountered two beings that she believed to be fairies, while she sat upon the edge of a loch.¹⁶⁷

In well known ballads, popular beliefs about water dominated locations where individuals were likely to encounter fairies tended to centre on wells. In *Tam Lin*, the protagonist, captured by fairies, appeared to his lover, Janet, by a well within a forest.¹⁶⁸ Depending upon the version of *Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight*, Lady Isabel was led by the Elf-Knight to a wood or a well.¹⁶⁹ The witches were taking inspiration from the popular beliefs captured in these ballads, which told of fairies appearing near bodies of water. Indeed, in some respects, the bodies of water themselves appear to have represented boundaries between Middle Earth and the other world.

Many witches also claimed that they gathered for witches' meetings in moors and greens outside of their settlements. Sometimes the locations named by witches were remote roads or

wilderness between settlements. In 1649, Agnes Clarkson claimed to have danced with a group of witches at the Green of Dirleton.¹⁷⁰ Similarly, Agnes Clarkson's fellow witch, Margaret Dickson, claimed to have danced for around one hour at Gladsmoor.¹⁷¹ In 1661, the Pilmore witch, Bessie Dawsoun, claimed that she attended a gathering that took place at Baghiemure.¹⁷² In Bute, in 1662, the witches confessed to meeting on several occasions, including one meeting that was held at Corsmore and another held between Mikell Kilmorie and Killeforne.¹⁷³

A number of witches also claimed to have gathered at the gate sides of their settlements, and on the outskirts of nearby settlements. The Crook of Devon witch, Margaret Huggon, claimed to have congregated with witches and the devil at Stanrie Gate, to the east of Crook of Devon.¹⁷⁴ During her same confession, Margaret also claimed she met the witches on another occasion at the gate side of Knochentinnie.¹⁷⁵ The importance for witches meeting at or outwith the boundaries of their settlements is one that continues throughout many witches' confessions.

Although the locations mentioned by Scottish witches appear to represent boundaries with the other world, these boundaries are still located within a few miles of the witches' homes. The small world inhabited by Scottish witches is particularly well demonstrated in the 1661 Forfar witch-hunt. In her confessions, Helen Guthrie spoke of visiting no fewer than five separate locations to attend the witches' sabbath. These locations included the churchyard in Forfar, the pavilion holl, the home of another accused witch, Cortachy Bridge, at a nearby castle in Cortachy, and finally at the coastal town of Barry, near Carnoustie.¹⁷⁶

165 Pitcairn (ed), *Trials*, vol 1, pp 49–58.

166 *Spalding Misc*, vol 1, pp 119–24.

167 *Acts and statutes of the Lawing Sheriff and Justice Courts within Orkney and Zetland* (Edinburgh, 1840), pp 51–5.

168 Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, p 91.

169 *Ibid*, p 41.

170 *RPC*, 2nd ser, vol 8, pp 189–190.

171 *Ibid*, pp 191–2.

172 *RPC*, 3rd ser, vol 1, pp 647–651.

173 MacPhail (ed), *Highland Papers*, vol 3, pp 9–10.

174 Begg Burns, 'Notice of trials for witchcraft at Crook of Devon, Kinross-shire, in 1662', p 234.

175 *Ibid*.

176 *Ibid*, pp 252–5.

However, Helen Guthrie's witches' sabbaths did not in any way encompass all of the witches' gatherings that were said to have taken place over the years and months leading up to the witchcraft accusations that broke out in August and September 1661. Indeed, the surviving trial records contain seventeen different locations that were mentioned by the nine confessing witches. Some of the witches mentioned landmarks in the local topography, including Janet Huit who confessed to attending a meeting on one of the islands, since disappeared, in the Loch of Forfar.¹⁷⁷ There are also numerous references to the surrounding local hills including Newman Hill and the Hill of Fineheaven.¹⁷⁸ The most remote destination that any of the Forfar witches claimed to have met at was at the coastal town of Barry, near Carnoustie, approximately 15 miles (24.14km) from Forfar.¹⁷⁹ The Forfar witches worked within a maximum radius of 15 miles around their homes.

It appears that the Forfar witches had a precise approach to their meetings, which were held within specific zones according to their importance and their function. The typical witches' gatherings that focused on feasting and dancing took place within the immediate vicinity of Forfar. The locations of those meetings ranged from the playing field, the bleaching green and the pavilion holl, to the hills immediately outside of Forfar. One exception to this theory is Helen Guthrie's assertion that the witches gathered in the churchyard of Forfar to raise unbaptised children from their graves.¹⁸⁰ This location was unlikely to have been chosen for its centrality, but instead for the specific ritual act of exhuming corpses. However, every one of the central locations mentioned by the witches as the scene of a witches' sabbath was very likely to be a place that they regularly visited in their everyday lives.

It is within the next zone of the witches' local area that the witches were most likely to have their initial encounter with the devil. On the boundaries between the witches' homes in Forfar and the closest towns and settlements, when the witches had stumbled into the liminal space on the borders of known territory and wilderness, the devil would make his move. Isobel Smith claimed that she met the devil in Cadger's Dean, on the outskirts of Brechin.¹⁸¹ Similarly, John Tailzour claimed to have met with the devil at Halcartoun and Peterden.¹⁸² Although these locations were sometimes in excess of 10 miles (16.09km) from Forfar, the accused witches did not claim to have travelled there for a witches' meeting. John Tailzour stated that he had travelled to Peterden to attend a market and was making such a trip when the devil approached him in Halcartoun.¹⁸³ Similarly, Isobel Smith was approached by the devil on the outskirts of Brechin, where she had travelled, presumably, to carry out business of her own.¹⁸⁴ It was very rare for witches to mention anywhere beyond their local towns to which they might have travelled on occasion, or would at least have heard being referred to by other members of their communities.

The final zone in the witches' sphere of influence stretched to Barry, some 15 miles from Forfar, where Helen Guthrie claimed to have met with two other witches, to plot the destruction of a ship moored off the coast.¹⁸⁵ This zone also encompassed the bridge at Cortachy Castle, around eight miles (12.87km) from Forfar. These two places are the furthest locations any of the Forfar witches claimed to have travelled to attend a witches' meeting. However, these meetings did not have the same characteristics as those that were said to have been held within the immediate vicinity of

177 Begg Burns, 'Notice of trials for witchcraft at Crook of Devon, Kinross-shire, in 1662', pp 247–8.

178 *Ibid.*, pp 247–8, p 256.

179 *Ibid.*, pp 252–5.

180 *Ibid.*

181 Begg Burns, 'Notice of trials for witchcraft at Crook of Devon, Kinross-shire, in 1662', p 256.

182 *Ibid.*, pp 248–9.

183 *Ibid.*

184 *Ibid.*, p 256.

185 *Ibid.*, pp 252–5.

Forfar. In these cases, a specific destination had been set with a specific destructive act in mind. The Forfar witches claimed to have travelled to Cortachy Bridge with the express intention of tearing it down. In most cases, there was a limit to how far the witches were willing to travel at the devil's request; however, these boundaries could be broken if there was a specific malicious act to be carried out.

The Scottish witches' ideas about the location of the witches' sabbath are at odds with the beliefs of some demonologists. Jean Bodin gave numerous examples of witches who had apparently travelled hundreds of kilometres to attend the witches' sabbath. Bodin described the story of one young witch who was said to have been carried by the devil for around four hundred kilometres from Lyons to Lorraine.¹⁸⁶ The Forfar witches' tendency to remain within relatively close proximity of their homes is typical in the Scottish source material. Although the locations selected by the witches who confessed to attending a witches' sabbath might be fairly remote they are often no more than a few miles from their home. It is unclear how much the witches knew of the world beyond their local town and presbytery, but the evidence in their confessions suggests they were relatively unconcerned with travelling beyond their immediate boundaries.

Although the vast majority of Scottish witches never claimed to have gone on amazing journeys to distant lands, there were some witches who confessed to visiting the other world or Fairyland. The cunning man, Andro Man, spoke of his frequent visits to Fairyland in full detail.¹⁸⁷ Perhaps in the minds of the witches Fairyland appeared to be much closer to the world inhabited by the Early Modern Scottish witch than the far away capital of Scotland, or the countries of England and France. In the minds of the confessing Scottish witches there seems to have been little to differentiate between the

boundaries that separated mortals from fairies and those that separated mortals from witches. It was believed the liminal space that was marked by boundaries, which were often represented by remote wilderness or even physical boundaries like gates, separated the known world from the dangerous unknown world.¹⁸⁸ The belief that one might accidentally stumble into Fairyland and become trapped there probably originated partly as a tale of caution to discourage individuals from wandering into unknown territory.¹⁸⁹ However, it seems to have been widely believed that by crossing the boundaries at these liminal locations the wanderer would have stumbled directly into the other world, which was inhabited by fairies, the dead and other spirits. The confessing witches appear to believe that witches inhabited the very same supernatural landscape as supernatural beings, and, as such, were almost inseparable from fairies in this respect. It is, therefore, unsurprising that many of the accused witches believed it would be appropriate to hold their secret witches' gatherings on the boundaries of this supernatural landscape.

DEVILISH DANCES

In many cases, a witch's acknowledgement that she or he had attended a witches' sabbath, and their confirmation of their supposed companions at this devilish gathering, seem to have been enough to satisfy the interrogators. However, many witches did elaborate on their descriptions of the meetings they claimed to have attended, and the witches themselves certainly played an integral role in the formulation of the accounts of the activities engaged in by Scottish witches at the witches' sabbath. The interrogators were likely to have directed the witches towards confirming certain important features of the witches' sabbath, including the devil's presence and the presence of other witches. However, the

186 Bodin, *On the Demon-mania of Witches*, p 115.

187 *SCM*, vol 1, pp 119–24.

188 Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, p 44.

189 *Ibid*.

questions posed to the witches regarding the purpose of the meetings and the activities that took place, in most cases, were probably more open. The witches were then able to work within the boundaries of the questions asked by the interrogators to construct their own descriptions of the witches' sabbath.

As already discussed, there were two main reasons why Scottish witches would be thought to gather. Some witches' meetings appear to have been social gatherings, not unlike gatherings that the individuals accused of witchcraft would have experienced within their own local community. However, some gatherings had sinister under-tones and appear to have been deliberately arranged with malicious and destructive acts in mind. The nature of the meeting in question was reflected in the activities that the witches claimed to have participated in. Meetings that focused on causing malicious damage certainly showed that the damage was the central focus of the meeting, but in some cases the witches engaged in other activities too. In the cases where the witches claimed to have met together in what appeared to be a social gathering they engaged in much more frivolous activities including singing, dancing and feasting. Although the devil might attend these social meetings, evil doing and worshipping the devil did not seem to have been the central focus.

The devil's presence at the witches' sabbath no doubt was an important factor in the minds of the interrogators, but often the devil's role at these meetings was rather ambiguous. Indeed, in a number of cases it appears the witches simply confirmed the devil's presence, when questioned by the interrogators, but the devil did not play any further role at the witches' sabbath. In 1597, Janet Davidson from Aberdeenshire, claimed the devil was present at a meeting at the Hill of Craiglich, but also said he was invisible to the witches.¹⁹⁰ In Bute, in 1662, Isobel McNicoll and Janet McNicoll both affirmed the devil's

presence at a meeting at Bute Quay, but failed to provide any further information on his role there.¹⁹¹

In some cases, the devil simply joined in with the festivities, either by playing music or joining in with the dancing. The devil was said to have danced with the Crook of Devon witches in 1661, at a meeting at Gibson's Craig.¹⁹² The Forfar witch, Isobel Smith, also claimed to have attended a meeting where the devil danced with the witches at the playing field of Forfar.¹⁹³ The devil might also join in with the witches' feasts, which was certainly the case in Forfar, where the devil was said to have sat at the head of the table at a meeting held in the home of the accused witch, Mary Rhynd.¹⁹⁴ At another meeting in Muiryknowes, the Forfar witch, Elspeth Alexander, claimed the witches and the devil drank together and feasted on meat.¹⁹⁵ In many of the witches' confessions, the devil blended almost seamlessly into the party of witches and did not seem to play a leading role in the witches' gathering. However, in some cases, the witches described the devil's presence and behaviour as far more malevolent.

During the witches' sabbath that allegedly took place in North Berwick Kirk, the devil was said to have conducted the meetings from the kirk's pulpit.¹⁹⁶ Throughout the Scottish witches' confessions there are various references to such interactions with the devil, including displays of homage, which ranged from the relatively tame shaking of the devil's hand to 'kissing the devil's arse', as in the case of the North Berwick witches.¹⁹⁷ In some cases, the devil actually kissed the witches, including in Forfar when Helen Guthrie claimed that the devil kissed every one of the witches present,

190 *Spalding Misc*, 5 vols (1844–52), vol 1, pp 150–1.

191 Macphail (ed), *Highland Papers*, vol 3, pp 12–13.

192 Begg Burns, 'Notice for Trials for Witchcraft at Crook of Devon, Kinross-shire, in 1662', p 228.

193 *Ibid*, p 256

194 *Ibid*, p 252–5.

195 *Ibid*, p 249–50.

196 Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*, pp 314–15.

197 *Ibid*.

but only kissed her own hand.¹⁹⁸ The Crook of Devon witch, Margaret Huggon, claimed that at two of the meetings she attended the devil shook hands with the witches.¹⁹⁹ Agnes Clarkson from Dirleton also claimed the devil attended a meeting at Dirleton Green, in the form of a black man with a staff, which he used to knock the witches on the head.²⁰⁰ These acts of homage to the devil were fairly unusual in accounts of the Scottish witches' sabbath, but might well have featured in particular cases when the interrogators encouraged the witches to elaborate on the devil's role at the meeting.

In some cases, the devil was said to have performed the diabolical baptism and demonic pact during the witches' sabbath. The Forfar witch, Janet Huit, claimed to have met with the devil for the first time when Isobel Shyrie carried her to a meeting on an island within the Loch of Forfar, but it was at a second witches' meeting at Muiryknowes that Huit claimed she entered into a pact with the devil.²⁰¹ Both Isobel Gowdie and Janet Braidhead claimed to have undergone the diabolical baptism at the Kirk of Auldearn and the Kirk of Nairn respectively.²⁰² The diabolical baptism at the witches' sabbath tended to feature most prominently in the confessions of witches who claimed to have been introduced to the devil, by other sworn witches, for the first time at the witches' sabbath. However, this research has demonstrated that this practice was quite unusual, as most witches claimed to have sealed their pact with the devil on an individual basis before attending the witches' sabbath.

Like the diabolical baptism and acts of homage to the devil, the witches rarely claimed to have engaged in carnal copulation with the devil at the witches' sabbath. In the confessions

that did refer to carnal copulation with the devil, the witches' often maintained that this was a private tryst, usually within their own homes. However, there are examples of witches who were said to have engaged in carnal copulation during the witches' sabbath. The Forfar witch, Isobel Shyrie, claimed she had had carnal copulation with the devil at a meeting at the Green Hill, near the Loch of Forfar.²⁰³ Indeed, the devil seemed to have been particularly busy in Forfar as Janet Huit also claimed that he had carnal copulation with her mother, Helen Guthrie, at a meeting at Newman Hill.²⁰⁴ According to the Penston witch, Margaret Dickson, the devil lay with another witch, Marion Richieson, at a meeting at Gladsmuir.²⁰⁵ However, despite these occasional references to carnal copulation with the devil, the Scottish witches never engaged in wild orgies with other witches or demons.

The devil's role in overseeing the witches' sabbath and providing the witches with instructions for carrying out maleficent magic was a central feature of the witches' sabbath in many demonologists' accounts. However, in Scotland, despite the devil's presence at most witches' sabbaths, he rarely dominated the gathering. The devil of the North Berwick witches' confessions took up a position in the church pulpit and called out a register of the witches' names before he enquired about the witches' works of maleficium.²⁰⁶ According to Janet Braidhead's confession of 1662, the devil was also said to have presided over a witches' meeting in the Kirk of Nairn, where he sat at the reader's desk.²⁰⁷ Isobel Gowdie, however, claimed that it was a meeting in the Kirk of Auldearn that was presided over by the devil, from his perch at the reader's desk.²⁰⁸

198 Anderson, 'The confessions of the Forfar Witches (1661)', pp 252–5.

199 Ibid, p 234.

200 *RPC*, 2nd ser, vol 8, pp 189–190.

201 Anderson, 'The confessions of the Forfar Witches (1661)', pp 252–5.

202 Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, p 39, p 543.

203 Anderson, 'The confessions of the Forfar Witches (1661)', pp 248–9.

204 Ibid, p 252.

205 *RPC*, 2nd ser, vol 8, pp 191–2.

206 Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*, p 147.

207 Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, p 543.

208 Ibid, p 39.

This is an interesting discrepancy between the two witches' accounts, as their descriptions of their experiences at their first witches' sabbath were suspiciously similar. It appears that much of Janet Braidhead's confession was based directly on Isobel Gowdie's, but it is unclear whether the interrogators asked Braidhead leading questions to ensure that both women's accounts complemented each other, or whether the interrogators simply lifted information directly from Gowdie's confession and inserted it into Braidhead's. Regardless, these accounts of the witches' sabbath are not typical among the Scottish witches' accounts and are heavily demonised in other areas. Although the devil did seem to take a position of authority in these unusual accounts, he still did not use this opportunity to explicitly instruct the witches on maleficent magic.

The witches who attended the witches' sabbath could be incited by the devil to carry out destructive acts directed towards their neighbours, livestock, land, ships or even infrastructure as part of their role at the witches' sabbath. In her first confession, on 13 April 1662, Isobel Gowdie famously claimed that the witches in her coven went to East Kinloss where they:

yoaked an plewgh of paddokis (frogs), the divell
held the plewgh and Johne
yownger in mediestowne o[u]r officer did drywe
the plewgh,
padokis did draw the plewgh as oxen [and] all ve
of the coeven went
wp and downe w[i]th the plewgh, prayeing to the
divell for the fruit
of th[a]t land and th[a]t thistles and brieris might
grow ther.²⁰⁹

Similarly, in her substantially less detailed confession of 1662, Bessie Henderson claimed the Crook of Devon witches trampled down the rye crop in Thomas White's field at the beginning of harvest in 1661.²¹⁰

The Forfar witch, Helen Guthrie, claimed that the devil and the Forfar witches travelled to Cortachy Bridge with the intention of pulling it down.²¹¹ The North Berwick witches claimed to have met together to plot and carry out a number of attacks and rituals – including an attempt to sink a ship.²¹² Margaret Dobson claimed, in her 1649 confession, that she and her associates travelled to William Burnet's house with the intention of taking his life.²¹³ Malicious harm or damage to people and property certainly do feature in a number of Scottish witches' confessions. These types of confessions concerning group maleficium would have been expected by the interrogators. However, in general, the type of maleficium supposedly carried out by the witches was influenced by popular fears of witches and their attacks on their neighbours and their livelihoods. The witches themselves would have been well aware of this popular belief in the nature of witches and witchcraft, and perhaps some of them believed that maleficium would have been the central focus for gathering at the witches' sabbath.

In some cases, the focus of the witches' meeting was to gather objects for their rituals and spells. The witches who claimed to have met in kirkyards, including Agnes Sampson, Patrick Lowrie, John Burgh, Margaret Watson, Helen Guthrie and Isobel Gowdie, did so with the specific act of disinterring corpses in mind. The cunning woman, Agnes Sampson, claimed that the North Berwick witches opened up three graves at the command of the devil and removed the fingers, toes and noses of the corpses, along with the winding sheets, which were to be dried and used for magic.²¹⁴ In 1605, the cunning man, Patrick Lowrie, confessed to attending meetings in 'diverse kirks and kirkyards' where he and his associates disinterred and

209 Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, p 39.

210 Anderson, 'The confessions of the Forfar Witches (1661)', p 224.

211 Anderson, 'The confessions of the Forfar Witches (1661)', pp 252–5.

212 Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft*, p 146–9.

213 *RPC*, 2nd ser, vol 8, p 196.

214 Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft*, pp 143–9.

dismembered a number of corpses, and used their body parts when practicing witchcraft.²¹⁵ Likewise, in 1643, the cunning man, John Burgh, confessed to exhuming several corpses and using the flesh of the bodies in a ritual to curse the cattle and goods of two men from Muckhart.²¹⁶ In 1644, Margaret Watson from Carnwath, confessed to attending meetings at the High Kirk of Carnwath and the High Kirk of Lanark where the witches exhumed corpses and used their members to successfully carry out evil turns against a number of men and women.²¹⁷ Isobel Gowdie from Nairnshire, claimed that the witches of her coven met in the kirkyard of Nairn, where they raised an unchristened child from its grave. According to Gowdie's confession, they chopped the child into very small pieces and mixed it with nail clippings, kale and grain before planting the evil concoction in a muckheap, in the hope of destroying the fertility of a neighbour's corn.²¹⁸ Helen Guthrie from Forfar similarly claimed, in her 1661 confession, that she raised an unbaptised child from its grave near the south-east door of the church, and used several pieces of the dismembered child in a pie that was to be eaten by the witches, to prevent them from confessing to their witchcraft.²¹⁹

The use of body parts in magical rituals was well known in Early Modern Scotland. In 1586, the cunning woman, Tibbie Smart, was accused of owning 'certane joint banes of men and women [that were] commonlie usit be sorceraris and witches'.²²⁰ Likewise in 1597, Janet Wishart from Aberdeen, was accused by a neighbour of stealing members from the corpse of a criminal hanging on the gallows.²²¹

The gathering of these body parts can be seen as the main objective of some witches' sabbaths, and it could be argued that the presence of these practices in the witches' confessions had origins in popular belief in the magical potency of these objects and the likelihood that witches employed them in magic rituals. This practice appears most prominently in the confessions of cunning folk, or those who could be considered as the guardians of popular belief and folklore. Emma Wilby has suggested that Isobel Gowdie may have been a tradition-bearer within her community and as such would have been well aware of the traditional beliefs surrounding the magical qualities of body parts stolen from the dead.²²² Similarly, Helen Guthrie's confession indicates she had knowledge of many popular traditions and beliefs, including fairy practices, shape shifting and, of course, the nefarious use of body parts. This practice did feature in some descriptions of continental witches' sabbaths and Julian Goodare has suggested that there seems to have been a distinct acceptance of this particular tradition in Scotland.²²³ Although the use of body parts appeared in a limited number of cases, it was clearly an element of popular belief that was easily absorbed into confessions describing the witches' sabbath, and seems to have been readily accepted by the elite interrogators.

The number of witches in attendance at the witches' sabbath could range widely from a small meeting of two or three witches to 'a whole army of witches', according to the Forfar witch, Isobel Smith.²²⁴ Agnes Sampson claimed in her confession, in early December 1590, that there were over one hundred witches at the meeting in North Berwick Kirk, but she failed to name all of these supposed accomplices.²²⁵ *Newes from Scotland* later claimed that the number of

215 Pitcairn (ed), *Trials*, vol 2, pp 477–9.

216 S I Gillon and J I Smith, *Selected Justiciary Cases, 1624–1650*, 3 vols (Stair Society, 1954–74), vol 3, pp 597–602.

217 *RPC*, 2nd ser, vol 8, pp 146–54.

218 Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, pp 37–41.

219 Anderson, 'The confessions of the Forfar Witches (1661)', p 252–5.

220 Maxwell-Stuart, *Satan's Conspiracy*, p 95.

221 *Spalding Misc*, vol 1, p 90, pp 94–5.

222 Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, pp 120–46.

223 Julian Goodare, 'The Scottish Witch-Hunt in its European Context', *Witchcraft and Belief* (ed) Goodare, Martin and Miller, pp 40–1.

224 Anderson, 'The confessions of the Forfar Witches (1661)', p 256.

225 Normand, and Roberts, *Witchcraft*, p 147.

witches in attendance at this gathering was two hundred.²²⁶ In 1661, Isobel Gowdie claimed witches' covens were made up of thirteen witches, but that the covens might meet together at the witches' sabbath.²²⁷ The Forfar witch, Janet Huit, claimed there were thirteen witches at the meeting she attended at the island in the Loch of Forfar, and twenty witches at a later meeting at Muiryknowes.²²⁸ It is, however, quite unusual for witches to identify a specific number of witches at the witches' sabbath. The number of witches was usually dictated by the number of accomplices the witches could name, which was often a major incentive for the interrogators to encourage the witches to initially confess to attending the witches' sabbath.

Scottish witches rarely gave details on how they reached the witches' sabbath, perhaps because the interrogators were not interested in this particular feature. As shown previously, the witches rarely ventured too far from home, and as such, it may be assumed that the majority of witches would have believed that they could walk to the witches' sabbath. Occasionally, however, the witches did mention how they arrived at the meeting. Agnes Sampson claimed she arrived at the witches' sabbath at North Berwick Kirk on horseback, but also claimed that, on other occasions, the witches sailed on the sea in both sieves and boats shaped like chimneys.²²⁹ In some cases, the witches asserted they had been 'carried' to the witches' sabbath by another witch. Janet Huit and Agnes Spark from Forfar, both claimed that they were carried to the witches' sabbath by the witch Isobel Shyrie.²³⁰ Although it is fairly unusual in Scottish accounts, some witches did claim to have flown to the witches' sabbath. In 1644,

the witch Margaret Watson from Carnwath, confessed that she and her companions flew on a cat, a cockerel, a thorn tree, a bundle of straw and an elder tree. Both thorn trees and elder trees were associated with the fairies, while the notion of riding upon straw was adopted by Isobel Gowdie from Nairnshire. Gowdie claimed in her 1662 confession that 'wild straves and corne straves wilbe hors (horses) to ws quhen ve put them betwixt owr foot, and say hors and hattok in the divellis nam'.²³¹

Bessie Flinker claimed that she was carried to a meeting 'upon the hills by a whirl of wind & masked herself, & ther danced with the rest'.²³² Whirlwinds were frequently associated with the fairies and Flinker was drawing on her knowledge of fairy lore to describe her journey to the witches' sabbath. The notion of flight was, for many Scottish witches, tightly bound up in fairy lore. Alexander Montgomery referred to fairy flight – and specifically to the use of flax stalk as an enchanted mode of transport.²³³ Emma Wilby has also traced Gowdie's use of the phrase 'hors and hattok in the divellis nam' to start up her magical straw steed, to its roots as a phrase ultimately derived from fairy lore.²³⁴ Many variations of this phrase are found within folkloric material and these popular beliefs filtered into some Scottish witches' accounts of the witches' sabbath. Certainly the choice of magical mounts were imbued with folkloric connotations, which appeared in the form of thorn trees, elder trees and bundles of straw.

Occasionally, the witches claimed to have changed into the shape of an animal to gain admittance to the location of the witches' sabbath, or to travel to other locations en route to a meeting. The Forfar witch, Helen Guthrie,

226 Normand, and Roberts, *Witchcraft*, p 314.

227 Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, pp 39–40.

228 Anderson, 'The confessions of the Forfar Witches (1661)', pp 245–62.

229 Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*, p 140, pp 145–9.

230 Anderson, 'The confessions of the Forfar Witches (1661)', pp 247–9.

231 Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, pp 37–41.

232 Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, p 37.

233 Alexander Montgomerie, 'Montgomerie's Answer to Polwart', in *Longer Scottish Poems* (ed) Priscilla J Bawcutt and Felicity Riddy, vol 1 (Edinburgh, 1987), pp 282–90.

234 Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, pp 92–3.

claimed that the witches entered the brewer John Benney's house through a little hole, in the shape of bees.²³⁵ Similarly, Helen Taylor from Berwick claimed, in 1649, that she and her accomplices entered the house of William Burnet through the chimney in the form of a black hen, a little foal and a whelp (puppy).²³⁶ Shape-shifting and flying were certainly present in popular belief prior to the advent of the witches' sabbath in Scotland, and these practices were not primarily associated with the witches' sabbath. Numerous other cases of shape-shifting exist in the Scottish witchcraft records and it is only one of the elements that have been assimilated with the beliefs the witches used to formulate their descriptions of the witches' sabbath. More importantly, flying, shape-shifting and supernatural transportation to the witches' sabbath exist in only a small number of accounts of the witches' sabbath, and it is far more common for witches to completely neglect to specify how they reached these secret meetings.

In some cases, the witches indicated they had travelled to the witches' sabbath, leaving an enchanted object in their bed, designed to trick their husbands into believing that they remained at home. During her second confession, Isobel Gowdie claimed that when the women from her coven left their houses to travel to the witches' sabbath they left brooms in their beds in case their husbands noticed their disappearance. Gowdie stated the witches would say a charm over the brooms in the devil's name, and the brooms would immediately take the shape of a woman.²³⁷ Popular belief indicated that an object, usually a piece of wood, could be enchanted to take on the form of a person. Isobel Gowdie's broom, that takes on the form of a woman, must first and foremost be considered to derive from popular belief in fairy stocks. The Bute witch, Margaret McLevin, claimed

that on a number of occasions the Bute witches attacked members of their community with elf-shot. Upon the death of their victims, the corpses were to be removed and replaced with a piece of wood or pieces of flesh.²³⁸ Presumably these enchanted objects, like a fairy changeling, were intended to convince the friends and family of the victim that the individual remained alive. Fairy changelings occupied a similar placebo role where the fairies might steal away a child and replace it with a fairy stock, which was an image of the child with a voracious appetite and an unpleasant nature.²³⁹ The Aberfoyle minister, Robert Kirk, claimed that new mothers were particularly vulnerable and were often the targets of the fairies seeking a wet-nurse for their own offspring.²⁴⁰

In some cases, there were indications that the witches recognised the secrecy of their meetings, and they identified various ways of protecting their identities. Some witches attempted to conceal their identities by performing magic or rituals to prevent any of their accomplices from confessing to their involvement in witchcraft. Geillis Duncan claimed that the North Berwick witches performed a ritual where a cat was cast into the sea at Leith while they said the words 'See there be no deceit among us'.²⁴¹ Similarly, Helen Guthrie from Forfar, claimed that the Forfar witches used body parts of the corpse of an unbaptised child to bake a pie, which she claimed would ensure that those who ate of it would not confess to their witchcraft.²⁴² In some cases, the witches claimed to have worn masks to their meetings in order to conceal their identities. Elspeth Blackie from Liberton, claimed, in 1661, to have attended a meeting at Gilmerton Ward with forty other masked witches.²⁴³ The practice of wearing masks

235 Anderson, 'The confessions of the Forfar Witches (1661)', pp 252–5.

236 *RPC*, 2nd ser, vol 8, pp 196–7.

237 Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, p 41–5.

238 MacPhail (ed), *Highland Papers*, vol 3, pp 9–10.

239 Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, p 96.

240 *Ibid*, pp 79–80.

241 Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*, p 151.

242 Anderson, 'The confessions of the Forfar Witches (1661)', pp 252–5.

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during festive celebrations remained common in Early Modern Scotland. The masks allowed individuals to engage in behaviour that was condemned by the law, or the church, with anonymity.²⁴⁴ It is clear that the witches were aware that witches' sabbaths, and the identity of the witches who attended them, needed to be protected with the utmost secrecy. Many of the witches' sabbaths described by Scottish witches were almost indistinguishable from the festivities and celebrations that would have been part of community life in Early Modern Scotland. There was music, dancing, singing, feasting, drinking and general merriment. In fact, if it wasn't for the presence of the devil at the gatherings, they might have been easily mistaken for a penny bridal or Yuletide celebration.

Certainly a common theme that runs through many witches' descriptions of the witches' sabbath is that of music and dancing, with the devil himself occasionally playing music for witches to dance to. Janet Lucas from Aberdeenshire, claimed that the devil played melodiously upon an instrument that was invisible to the witches.²⁴⁵ However, the Aberdeenshire witch, Isobel Cockie, disagreed with Janet Lucas by claiming that at the witches' sabbath that was said to have taken place at the fish market cross in Aberdeen, the devil did not play melodiously and so she took the instrument from him and played herself.²⁴⁶ The accused witch, Geillis Duncan, played the trump (Jew's harp) at the meeting at North Berwick Kirk in 1590.²⁴⁷ Later, in 1661, Isobell Smyth from Pilmure in Haddington, claimed that the witches had a piper at their meeting held at Back Burn, but they did not know where the piper was.²⁴⁸ In 1661, Agnes Spark from Forfar, simply stated that when the witch Isobel

Shyrie carried her to a meeting at Little Mill she heard sweet music that might have been music from the pipe.²⁴⁹ The popularity of the pipes in Early Modern Scotland is attested to by the accused witches and even seems to have been the favoured instrument of the fairies. Alison Pierson claimed that she attended a fairy gathering where there was piping and good cheer.²⁵⁰ Similarly, Donald McIlmichael claimed that he played the pipes at a meeting of unidentified beings in 1677.²⁵¹ The importance of music as a central motif in the witches' confessions certainly shows the importance of the fundamental theme of merriness and good cheer at the witches' sabbath. This might be surprising considering the fear with which the witches were treated and the supposed presence of the devil.

In some cases, the witches seemed to favour singing instead of instrumental music. A number of Scottish witches claimed that members of their parties sang songs or ballads to entertain the witches at their gatherings. Helen Guthrie from Forfar, claimed that her fellow accused witch, Isobel Shyrie, sang a song called 'Tinkletum Tankletum' at a meeting that took place in the churchyard of Forfar.²⁵² Helen Guthrie also claimed that another accused witch, Andrew Watson, sang old ballads and made great merriment at a later meeting.²⁵³ Isobel Murray claimed to have attended a meeting at the Butter Dam, near Penston in Haddington, where another witch, Margaret Dickson, sang to the witches.²⁵⁴ It may well have been that the witches who were said to have sung at these witches' sabbaths were already known within their community for singing at social gatherings or even around the fireside at night. If this was

244 Todd, 'Profane Pastimes', pp 131–2.

245 *Spalding Misc*, vol 1, pp 147–9.

246 *Ibid*, pp 114–15.

247 Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*, p 315.

248 *RPC*, 3rd ser, vol 1, p 650.

249 Anderson, 'The confessions of the Forfar Witches (1661)', p 252.

250 Pitcairn (ed), *Trials*, vol 1, pp 161–4.

251 MacPhail (ed), *Highland Papers*, vol 3, pp 37–8.

252 Anderson, 'The confessions of the Forfar Witches (1661)', pp 252–5.

253 *Ibid*.

254 *RPC*, 2nd ser, vol 8, p 193–4.

the case then entertaining at a social gathering would be a customary role for them to play, and it would be obvious that they should do this at a social event, even if it was one as unusual as the witches' sabbath.

Both music and singing were mentioned specifically as being part of many witches' sabbaths. However, the act of dancing at the witches' sabbath features even more frequently. It could be implied that the witches had music or singing to dance along to as the witches might simply have taken its presence for granted. At Halloween in 1590, the North Berwick witches were said to have danced along North Berwick kirkyard.²⁵⁵ In 1661, Janet Baigbie, from Bolton in Haddington, claimed that the devil took the witches by the hand to lead the dance.²⁵⁶ The Crook of Devon witch, Bessie Neil, claimed she and her accomplices met at Gibson's Craig and all danced together with Satan.²⁵⁷ Likewise, Isobel Murray from Penston, claimed, in 1649, that the devil danced among the witches with another witch, Grissell Anderson, in his hand.²⁵⁸ However, sometimes the devil was not mentioned in relation to the witches' dance so it is impossible to know whether the witches believed that the devil would have been dancing with them or simply overseeing the dance. Dancing would have been a much anticipated part of festivities and celebrations and was enjoyed by much of the population of 16th- and 17th-century Scotland. The association of dancing with celebrations and social gatherings is likely to have influenced the witches' descriptions of the witches' sabbath as the act of dancing would have seemed like such a natural part of social gatherings, and may still have been considered so even if those present at the gathering were witches.

Another one of the most frequent pastimes indulged in by the witches who claimed to have attended the witches' sabbath was feasting. This activity was not nearly as frequently mentioned as dancing, but featured in a substantial number of the more detailed accounts of the witches' sabbath. In some cases, the witches claimed to have consumed bread and ale just as they would have as part of their daily lives but sometimes, as in the case of Janet Huit, this offering left the witches unfulfilled.²⁵⁹ Many witches claimed that the devil offered them promises or gifts that failed to materialise after they entered into a pact with him. Popular belief in the nature and practices of the fairies and specifically the belief that they could steal all the goodness and nutrition from food while leaving the food visibly intact might also have influenced Huit's confession.²⁶⁰ Clearly some witches were drawing on popular belief about the supernatural to supplement their narratives of the witches' sabbath.

Although a few witches claimed they had consumed food and drink they would often have had access to in their day-to-day lives, the majority of witches were convinced that in their rituals they would have dined on much more expensive and delicious food. Agnes Hunter from Penston in Haddington, claimed that the witches went to Thomas Dickson's house in Longniddry where they ate meat and drank wine together.²⁶¹ The Forfar witch, Helen Guthrie, claimed that some of the witches who had gathered at the witch Mary Rhynd's house broke into John Benney's house where they stole ale, while other witches simultaneously broke into another house from which they stole whisky.²⁶² The Nairnshire witch, Isobel Gowdie, similarly claimed that when they went to any house they stole meat and drink before refilling the barrels with their own urine. Gowdie even claimed the

255 Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*, p 147.

256 *RPC*, 3rd ser, vol 1, p 649.

257 Begg Burns, 'Notice of trials for witchcraft at Crook of Devon, Kinross-shire, in 1662', p 228.

258 *RPC*, 2nd ser, vol 8, pp 193–4.

259 *RPC*, 2nd ser, vol 8, pp 245–62.

260 Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, p 63.

261 *RPC*, 2nd ser, vol 8, pp 190–1.

262 Anderson, 'The confessions of the Forfar Witches (1661)', p 252–5.

witches broke into the Earl of Moray's house where they ate and drank of the best before stealing some more supplies and flying away through the windows.²⁶³

Although there may have been a difference in the Highland and Lowland diets of 16th- and 17th-century Scotland, there was a distinct under-reliance on meat products. In some areas individuals would have been living on a diet where approximately 80% of their daily calorie intake would have been derived from grain products.²⁶⁴ This diet would occasionally have been supplemented by animal products including eggs, butter, milk, cheese, meat and fish, but in most cases, whether Highland or Lowland, the inhabitants would rarely have eaten meat, except on special occasions.²⁶⁵ Apart from the free consumption of meat at the witches' sabbath, the witches also reported that they drank wine during course of the festivities. It is likely that the majority of the witches who claimed to have consumed wine had only ever tasted a drop at their communion celebrations. Wine often cost substantially more than ale, which was the common drink for most of the population. In Edinburgh in 1664, a Scots pint of ale cost twenty-four pence, while a pint of wine cost between sixteen and thirty-six shillings.²⁶⁶ In relative terms, the cost of a pint of wine is likely to have been far more than many labourers' daily wages.²⁶⁷ Consequently, the witches' tales of feasting on meat and wine were probably fantasies the witches chose to indulge in when giving their accounts of the witches' sabbath.

During their descriptions of obtaining and feasting on the rare commodities of meat and wine, the witches were almost certainly drawing upon folkloric stories of house-to-house

processions that saw fairies, and in this case witches, breaking into the homes of others to steal from their plentiful supplies of food. Indeed, Helen Guthrie's claim that the witches stole the 'substance of the ale' when they broke into John Benney's house is reminiscent of the popular belief that the fairies could steal the goodness of the food while leaving it looking intact.²⁶⁸ It was the peasant fantasy of indulging in food and drink to the excess by breaking into their neighbours' bountiful supplies, and enjoying this indulgence without having to confront the consequences of their actions if the next harvest was to fail.²⁶⁹ The witches' descriptions of the feasts at the witches' sabbath are also closely comparable to popular belief surrounding the activities of fairies at their revels. In 1588, Alison Pierson claimed that when she was confronted by the fairy court, they brought with them wine and goblets to drink from.²⁷⁰ The witches took some of their inspiration from popular beliefs about the nature of fairy gatherings where the fairies were believed to indulge in the best food and wine.

It has been suggested above that popular belief in fairies and the times, dates and places associated with their practices, influenced the witches' descriptions of the witches' sabbath. Similarities between descriptions of the witches' sabbath and fairy gatherings also suggest the witches drew on these beliefs to embellish their descriptions of the activities that were said to have taken place at the witches' sabbath. The fairies were certainly believed to find festive gatherings almost irresistible, and to enjoy great feasts as well as music and dancing. Andro Man from Aberdeen, claimed in his 1598 confession that the fairies 'have playing and dancing quhen thay pleas'.²⁷¹ Katherine Jonesdochter from Shetland also claimed the

263 Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, p 39.

264 Alex J S Gibson and T C Smout, *Prices, Food and Wages in Scotland: 1550-1780* (Cambridge, 1995), pp 225-6.

265 *Ibid.*, p 226.

266 *Ibid.*, p 61, p 63.

267 *Ibid.*, p 275.

268 Anderson, 'The confessions of the Forfar Witches (1661)', pp 252-5.

269 Lyndal Roper, *Witch Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany* (New Haven, 2006), p 118.

270 Pitcairn (ed), *Trials*, vol 1, pp 161-4.

271 *Spalding Misc.*, vol 1, pp 117-25.

trowis – fairy-like nature spirits – came to any house where there was ‘feasting, or great mirrines and specialle at Yule’.²⁷² Although Donald McIllmichael did not explicitly identify those beings present at the candlelit gathering he attended as the fairies, they certainly show some fairy-like characteristics in their activities and their choice of location in the bowels of a fairy hill.²⁷³ McIllmichael claimed that he had returned to join in with these meetings on numerous occasions where he began to play on the ‘trumps to them quhen they danced’.²⁷⁴ Evidently the fairies were believed to enjoy their festive excesses and both Andro Man and Donald McIllmichael agreed that these excesses could involve lighting their chosen venue with many candles. The North Berwick witch, Agnes Sampson, claimed that North Berwick Kirk was lit by great black candles that stood around the pulpit.²⁷⁵ Candles were a relatively expensive commodity in Early Modern Scotland and many of the witches would have lived primarily by firelight during the long, dark winter months.²⁷⁶

As has been argued in relation to the witches’ apparent belief that witches would inhabit the same supernatural landscape as the fairies, they also seem to have believed that witches and fairies would have had strikingly similar social gatherings. Given the witches’ reliance on fairy folklore in other aspects of their descriptions of the witches’ sabbath, it would be unsurprising to find that the witches believed both fairies and witches would engage in similar revels. The witches might well have fused popular belief about fairies and the supernatural into their descriptions of the witches’ sabbath, but it is also likely they drew on real life experiences at gatherings and celebrations. Christina Lerner argued that the witches’ descriptions of their behaviour at the witches’ sabbath were the result

of fantasies developed in opposition to the social constraints placed on the population by the Protestant Kirk.²⁷⁷ Following the Reformation, the Protestant Kirk was determined to quash any ‘popish’ superstition, and any behaviour that might have distracted the newly reformed laity from moral discipline and worship. The Kirk specifically condemned drunkenness, gluttony, dancing, and the wearing of vain apparel which, in the minds of the church leaders, all led to promiscuous and indecent behaviour.²⁷⁸ It was the belief of the church leaders that drinking and dancing at a celebration and the atmosphere of mirth could easily lead to extra-marital sex, which was something the Kirk wished to actively discourage. Lerner argued it was this condemnation that forced the witches to live out their fantasies, indulging in all the behaviour prohibited by the reformed Kirk in their descriptions of the witches’ sabbath.²⁷⁹

It is true the witches did claim to have participated in gatherings and festivities that resembled those directly condemned by the Kirk, but the Kirk struggled to enforce the acts passed to stamp out these practices. The Kirk continually re-issued regulations that banned profane pastimes including local personal celebrations like baptisms, marriages and funerals, and pre-Reformation religious celebrations including Yule and Easter. Often, when it was clear that celebrations would continue despite its protests, the Kirk sought to limit the number of participants involved. Local kirk sessions, at times, sought deposits to ensure proper adherence to their rules, and subjected transgressors to fines and penances. The Rothesay kirk session passed an act on 16 December 1658 to regulate the disorder taking place at penny bridals. The act declared there should be ‘no moe then eight mense (men) at most, that ther be no pypeing nor promiscuous danceing’ and ‘no sitting up to drink after ten

272 Donaldson, *Court Book of Shetland, 1615–162*, p 38–41.

273 MacPhail (ed), *Highland Papers*, vol 3, pp 37–8.

274 Ibid.

275 Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*, p 147.

276 Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, p 10.

277 Lerner, *Enemies of God*, p 153.

278 Todd, ‘Profane Pastimes’, pp 126–7.

279 Lerner, *Enemies of God*, p 153.

a clock at night'.²⁸⁰ The fact that the Rothesay kirk session was forced to issue this act in 1658 suggests this type of celebration and behaviour continued, in the church's view, to pose a problem within Scottish society.

The Scottish people were far from discouraged by the acts issued by the kirk sessions as, throughout the period, many individuals were admonished before local kirk sessions, and, in most cases, faced fines or public acts of repentance as a result of their behaviour.²⁸¹ The frequency with which these laws were ignored is testament to the determination of the populace not to allow these occasions to pass without traditional celebrations. The suppression of popular festivities and celebrations was not as successful as the reformed Kirk had hoped.²⁸² The behaviour the Rothesay kirk session wished to eliminate at penny bridals included gathering together in substantial numbers, drinking and dancing to pipe music, and in many ways appears little different to descriptions of the witches' sabbath. Evidently the witches would have had no need to fantasise about indulging in festivities and celebrations as they obviously remained an important part of Scottish society. Therefore, it is quite likely that the witches were drawing on their experiences at these celebrations to elaborate on their descriptions of the witches' sabbath.

Michael Bailey identified the primary characteristic of the witches' sabbath according to four medieval authorities on witchcraft as 'a secret sect, the presence of the devil, apostasy and veneration, and instruction in magic'.²⁸³ Some of these elements, including the presence of the devil, were important features of the Scottish witches' sabbath. The secrecy of the sect was only specifically mentioned in a

small number of cases, but this is certainly an element that would be generally implied with the meetings being carried out under the cover of darkness. Apostasy and veneration featured in a small number of cases when the witches paid homage to the devil, and in the cases when the diabolical baptism was performed at the witches' sabbath, but it was not a central element within most Scottish witches' descriptions of the witches' sabbath. Similarly, as far as this research has demonstrated, the belief that the devil passed on instructions on magic to the witches at the witches' sabbath did not feature within the Scottish witches' accounts.

THE WITCHES' SABBATH: A JOURNEY TO THE OTHERWORLD?

In Early Modern Scotland, popular belief indicated that there were numerous other worlds. The Scottish people believed that they inhabited Middle Earth, which was situated between Heaven and Hell. Popular belief also indicated that Middle Earth lay on the boundary with the other world, sometimes known as the spirit world, which was inhabited by supernatural beings – including fairies and the wandering dead. As discussed previously, witches were often found to gather at the boundaries that separated the other world from Middle Earth. However, in some cases, the witches appear to believe that they had crossed those boundaries and entered the other world.

The imagined boundaries between the other world and Middle Earth were as real to the witches who believed in them as the homes and settlements in which they lived. The importance of the boundaries between Middle Earth and the other world has been discussed by Eva Pócs, who has indicated that specific boundary motifs, which marked the entrance to the other world, would have been universally recognised.²⁸⁴ These portals to the other world were often

280 Henry Paton (ed), *The Session Book of Rothesay, 1658–1750* (Edinburgh, 1931), p 5.

281 Todd, 'Profane Pastimes', p 129.

282 Ibid.

283 Bailey, Michael, 'The Medieval Concept of the Witches' sabbath', *Exemplaria* 8 (1996), p 421.

284 Pócs, *Between the Living and the Dead*, p 80.

identified by small holes or cracks, narrow paths and bridges.²⁸⁵ According to Pócs, the presence of boundary motifs such as these in witches' accounts of travelling to the witches' sabbath, would indicate that the witches believed they were travelling between worlds.²⁸⁶

Evidence of these boundary motifs can be identified in some of the Scottish witches' accounts. Helen Guthrie claimed that the Forfar witches assumed the form of bees to enter into the local brewer's house through a small hole.²⁸⁷ Guthrie also claimed that at another meeting in Barry she was appointed to take hold of the rope that anchored the boat the witches had come to destroy, while the other witches and the devil went onto the sea on the rope to reach the boat.²⁸⁸ Similarly, Helen Taylor, from Berwick, claimed that she and her accomplices had entered the house of William Burnet in animal form, through the chimney.²⁸⁹ Like Helen Taylor and Helen Guthrie, some Scottish witches claimed to have travelled in the form of animals. Although some witches may have meant that they physically transformed into animals, Pócs has suggested that animal-metamorphosis might also have signalled a transfer between levels of existence, and entrance into the other world.²⁹⁰ Bessie Thom, from Aberdeenshire, claimed that some of the witches transformed into hares, cats and other animals at a meeting at the Fish Market Cross of Aberdeen.²⁹¹ The Alloa witches allegedly flew in the likeness of crows, and the Nairnshire witch, Isobel Gowdie, claimed that she and the other members of her coven travelled to their meetings in the form of crows, hares and cats.²⁹² Isobel Murray from Penston claimed

that she left her house with the devil who was in the likeness of a great black dog, and, after the devil nipped her left shoulder, she returned to her home in the likeness of a cat. It was not until Murray re-entered her own house that she transformed back into her own likeness.²⁹³ Murray seems to have believed that she moved from one world to another and only returned to her human form when she re-entered Middle Earth.

Witches, however, were not the only supernatural beings who could appear in animal form. The Aberdeen cunning man, Andro Man, claimed that he met Christsonday, a being which Man identified as an angel and God's godson, in the form of a stag, at a meeting with the Queen of Elphen.²⁹⁴ The devil himself was also believed to appear to the witches in various forms, including a dog, a cat or even a foal. The Scottish witches appear to have believed that supernatural beings could alter their appearance and appear in the shape of animals, and it is possible that some witches believed that their own form could be altered when they travelled in the other world.

Animal-metamorphosis was not the only indication that witches had transferred their existence to the other world. According to Pócs, flying was also a common symbolic expression of a journey to the other world.²⁹⁵ Margaret Watson from Carnwath, claimed that she and her companions flew on a cat, a cockerel, a thorn tree, a bundle of straw and an elder tree.²⁹⁶ In 1597, two of the Aberdeenshire witches also claimed that they rode on trees at a meeting at Aberdeen's Fish Market Cross.²⁹⁷ In a rather unusual description of travelling to the witches' sabbath, the North Berwick witch, Agnes Sampson, claimed that she was on the sea in a boat that flew like a swallow.²⁹⁸ In 1662, Isobel Gowdie also claimed that she flew on a number

285 Pócs, *Between the Living and the Dead*, p 80.

286 *Ibid.*

287 Anderson, 'The confessions of the Forfar Witches (1661)', pp 252–5.

288 *Ibid.*

289 *RPC*, 2nd ser, vol 8, pp 196–7.

290 Pócs, *Between the Living and the Dead*, p 79.

291 *Spalding Misc*, vol 1, pp 166–7.

292 Goodare, 'Scottish witchcraft', p 36; Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, p 44.

293 *RPC*, 2nd ser, vol 8, pp 192–3.

294 *Spalding Misc*, vol 1, pp 119–24.

295 Pócs, *Between the Living and the Dead*, p 77.

296 *RPC*, 2nd ser, vol 8, pp 146–54.

297 *Spalding Misc*, vol 1, pp 164–7.

298 Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*, p 140.

of occasions, while astride various types of straw.²⁹⁹

In some accounts of the witches' sabbath, the witches claimed that they were 'carried' to their destination by the devil, the fairies or other witches. Being carried or abducted by the fairies, or other supernatural beings, usually meant that the victim was taken to Fairyland or the other world. In her 1588 confession, Alison Pierson claimed that her cousin, William Simpson, was 'careit away with thame [the fairies] out of middil-erd'.³⁰⁰ In this case, Pierson seems to mean that William Simpson was physically carried to the other world in his material body, and, according to her confession, he remained with the fairy court. The Forfar witches, Janet Huit and Agnes Spark both claimed that they were carried to meetings by another witch, Isobel Shyrie.³⁰¹ Spark claimed that Shyrie carried her back to her own house after the meeting, and the next day Spark found Shyrie in much pain as a result of her role as 'the devil's horse'.³⁰² This indicates that Spark believed the witches were physically present at the meeting in question as Shyrie's hands were apparently physically damaged.

There was also an interesting occurrence in Forfar when, as attested to by three of her prison guards, Helen Guthrie was lifted three or four feet from the ground when the devil tried to carry her out of prison.³⁰³ This is a very unusual case in that three men claimed to have witnessed this event, and even claimed to have struck at Guthrie with their swords to prevent her from being carried away.³⁰⁴ The belief that the devil was capable of physically carrying witches through the air was certainly present in Scotland during the period in question. The Bute witch, Margaret McLevin, claimed she was

carried under the devil's armpit, over the sea to Inchmarnock Island. The devil later dropped McLevin on a rock where she was found by a woman who she could not remember.³⁰⁵

There are only a handful of cases that contain symbolic motifs that indicate the witches' sabbath was believed to have been held in the other world. However, there is ample evidence to show the Scottish witches believed it was possible to travel to the other world. The witches who claimed to have reached the witches' sabbath in animal form, by flying or by being carried by another witch or the devil, probably believed their destination was in the other world. However, it is important to indicate that the belief that it was possible to travel to the other world did not necessarily mean the witches believed that they had done so. Some witches may have been drawing on popular belief about fairy abductions and visiting the other world, which would have allowed them to effectively construct a narrative of visiting the other world without believing they had done so. However, even if the individual confessions that indicated the witches' sabbath was held in the other world were not believed by those who constructed them, it is possible that the accused witches still believed the witches' sabbath would have been held in the other world.

The debate about whether witches travelled to the witches' sabbath in their material body or in spirit is one that raged on throughout the Early Modern period. The debates amongst demonologists centred on whether the witches had travelled to the witches' sabbath in their physical body, with the assistance of the devil, or whether the witches had simply been tricked by the devil into believing they had been to the witches' sabbath. In the minds of the educated interrogators, it was theologically impossible for the witches to travel to the witches' sabbath in spirit form as it was believed that the body and spirit could not be separated during

299 Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, pp 39–40.

300 Pitcairn (ed), *Trials*, vol 1, pp 161–4.

301 Anderson, 'The confessions of the Forfar Witches (1661)', pp 247–52.

302 Ibid, p 252.

303 Ibid, pp 246–7.

304 Ibid.

305 MacPhail (ed), *Highland Papers*, vol 3, p 7.

life.³⁰⁶ Therefore, the witches who made confessions, suggesting they believed they could visit the other world in spirit form, would often have been regarded as deluded by demonologists.

In *Daemonologie*, James VI identified three possible means by which witches could be transported to the witches' sabbath. The witches could attend the witches' sabbath in their physical body by natural means, including sailing and riding, or they could be transported by the devil through the air or over the sea for as long as they could hold their breath.³⁰⁷ However, according to James VI, the witches could also be tricked by the devil into believing they had travelled to the witches' sabbath in animal form, through small gaps in churches and houses, or tricked into believing their spirits had attended the witches' sabbath while their bodies lay in ecstasy.³⁰⁸ Although he was of the view that the witches were deluded to believe their bodies and spirits could be separated, James VI also believed the witches were not lying about their presence at the witches' sabbath.³⁰⁹ James VI, like many other demonologists, could not accept that the witches had travelled to the witches' sabbath in spirit form and, instead, suggested the witches were deceived by the devil during dreams or trances.³¹⁰ Similarly, in the 1670s, George Mackenzie, a lawyer and the King's Advocate in Scotland, claimed that many of the Scottish witches' confessions that included accounts of travelling many miles, sometimes in animal form, were 'but an illusion of the fancy, wrought by the Devil upon their melancholy brains, whilst they sleep'.³¹¹

However, James VI and George Mackenzie were not the only educated individuals who were concerned with identifying the form in

which the Scottish witches attended the witches' sabbath. The distinction between attending the witches' sabbath in physical body, or in dreams or trances, was important to some educated Scottish interrogators. The author of *Newes from Scotland* made it clear that the North Berwick witches sailed 'very substantially' in sieves to the meeting at North Berwick Kirk.³¹² This indicates that Carmichael, if he was indeed the author of the pamphlet, knew about the debate surrounding the witches' physical or spiritual presence at the witches' sabbath, and wanted to eliminate any ambiguity as to whether or not the North Berwick witches were physically present at this meeting.

Establishing that a witch was physically present at the witches' sabbath was also important for the interrogators who questioned the Alloa witches. During the interrogations in 1658 the witches were asked leading questions to establish whether they had been to the witches' sabbath in their physical body or their dreams:

The said Bessie Paton being posit whither she wes at any time in the company of witches and whither she was carried in her sleepe & dreamed of witches sche said she cannot tell.³¹³

Bessie Paton denied being bodily present at any of the witches' meetings, but it is quite clear that, in this case, her distinction between the two forms of attending the witches' sabbath was the result of leading questions, and not necessarily of any distinction drawn in her own mind. It is important to remember that educated interrogators may themselves have introduced the distinction between attending the witches' sabbath in a physical body or in dreams and trances to some witches' accounts.

There are a number of Scottish accounts where the spirit of the witch appears to travel to the other world while the witch remained in a dream or trance. The North Berwick witch John Fian, claimed he was:

306 Goodare, 'Scottish witchcraft', p 36.

307 Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*, pp 387–9.

308 Ibid.

309 Ibid.

310 Ibid.

311 George Mackenzie, *Pleadings in some Remarkable Cases before the Supreme Courts of Scotland, since the year 1661* (Edinburgh, 1673), pp 194–5.

312 Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft*, p 314.

313 NRS Stirling Presbytery Records, CH2/722/6, p 96.

struck in great ecstasies and trances, lying by the space of two or three hours dead, his spirit taken, and suffered himself to be carried and transported to many mountains as though through all the world.³¹⁴

Fian was also found guilty of ‘suffering himself to be carried to North Berwick Kirk (he being in a closed bed in Prestonpans), as if he had been sougning athwart the earth’ indicating that Fian was ‘carried’ over the ground with a whistling sound.³¹⁵ The Perthshire folk healer, Isobel Haldane claimed that while she was lying in bed she was carried, whether by God or the devil she could not say, into a hillside where she remained with the fairies for four days.³¹⁶ The Newbattle witch, Beatrix Leslie, claimed she was carried in her sleep to the company of many brave souls.³¹⁷ Isobel Elliott from Dalkeith, claimed, in her 1678 confession, that ‘she left her bodie in Pencaitland, and went in the shape of a corbie (crow), to Laswade, to see a child she had nursed’.³¹⁸ These confessions indicate the witches were experiencing trances or dreams during which they believed they travelled to the witches’ sabbath or, the other world. In these confessions, the witches made a clear distinction between travelling in the other world in body or in spirit.

Travelling to the other world in the subtle body, or in spirit, was normally believed to occur when the material body remained behind, while the spirit entered another realm. According to Pócs, belief that the shadow-soul, or image of the witch, could become detached from the material body and move around in the spirit world was uniformly accepted throughout Early Modern Europe.³¹⁹ Members of the spirit groups, or cults, known as the *benandanti*, the *donas de fuera* and the *táltos* believed their

spirits left their bodies and went out to the other world.³²⁰ Research into the functioning of these groups has indicated that these soul-trips into the other world were likely to have been a real visionary experience for members of these cults.

Emma Wilby’s recent research has indicated that some Scottish witches may also have had real visionary experiences in which they attended the witches’ sabbath.³²¹ Wilby has attributed these visionary experiences to shamanistic practices and dream cults, which she suggests may have been present within Early Modern Scotland.³²² These dream cults would have had similarities with other European dream cults, including the *benandanti*, and the *donas de fuera*, and their practices would also have been rooted in ‘shamanistic spirit-group traditions of folkloric origin’.³²³ According to Wilby’s theory, the members of these spirit groups travelled to the other world while experiencing ecstatic trances.³²⁴ Like the members of the *benandanti* and *táltos*, Wilby has argued that some Scottish witches believed that their spirits could ride out to the other world on broomsticks or animals or, sometimes, in animal form themselves, while their bodies remained at home.³²⁵

Visionary experience as the root of spirit group narratives has been identified by historians including Ginzburg, Henningsen, and Wilby as a result of shamanistic beliefs and practices, which they claim were employed by practitioners to communicate with the spirit world.³²⁶ Ronald Hutton has convincingly argued that the most important feature of shamanism was the

314 Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*, p 226.

315 Ibid.

316 *RPC*, 2nd ser, vol 8, pp 352–4.

317 Goodare, ‘Scottish witchcraft’, p 37.

318 Ibid, p 36.

319 Pócs, *Between the Living and the Dead*, pp 95–6.

320 Goodare, ‘Scottish witchcraft’, p 37.

321 Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, p 496.

322 Ibid, p 533.

323 Ibid, p 532.

324 Carlo Ginzburg, ‘Deciphering the sabbath’, in *Early Modern European Witchcraft* (ed) Ankarloo and Henningsen, p 127.

325 Gábor Klaniczay, ‘Shamanism and Witchcraft’, *Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft* 1.2 (2006), p 216.

326 Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches’ sabbath*; Henningsen, ‘The Ladies from the Outside’; Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*.

dramatic ritualised public performance of the shaman as a means of working with spirits to produce results in the human world.³²⁷ However, no cases have so far been found that suggest the Scottish witches performed public rituals that allowed them to enter trances in which they communicated with spirits, but this is not to say that they did not experience trances in which they believed they communicated with spirits. In some cases, these visionary experiences might have been, at least initially, involuntary and the product of physical or emotional trauma.

Louise Yeoman has studied the visions and practices of the Covenanting prophetesses, which indicate they experienced their first visions during, or after, a physical illness. The prophetess, Barbara Peebles, claimed she had her first vision while she was sleep-deprived and in the third night of an illness.³²⁸ Likewise, the prophetess, Grizell Love, had her first angelic visitation after she had, for two days, 'looked on as sick unto death'.³²⁹ The physical and emotional trauma placed on the witches by the interrogation process, which was likely to have included the physical exhaustion and pain associated with sleep-deprivation, maltreatment or torture, witch-pricking and the discomfort associated with incarceration, might have resulted in a visionary experience for some witches. The emotional pressure felt by the accused witches probably began before their arrest as many women and men must have feared the implications it would have on their life if another accused witch identified them as a witch during their confession. In some cases, the witches may not have had a visionary experience in which they participated in the witches' sabbath prior to their arrest and incarceration, but they may have experienced a sleeping or waking

vision, influenced by leading questions, during the course of the interrogation process.

In some cases, the visions and trances experienced by individuals might have begun in response to physical or emotional upheaval that occurred long before they were apprehended and questioned about their alleged crime of witchcraft. The narratives of initial meetings with the devil often indicate the witches' personal circumstances had left them emotionally distressed, and at the height of the emotional pressure the devil appeared to entice the witch into becoming his servant.³³⁰ In a small number of these accounts, the individuals might have had an involuntary vision in which the devil, or another spirit-being, offered to solve the problems of their personal situation. This type of vision fulfils a compensatory role and may have been a projection of the personal unconscious to compensate for the sufferer's unfulfilled needs.³³¹ A typical example of this type of projection is that of the imaginary friend, often produced by children in response to loneliness.³³² After experiencing an initial visionary experience, the witch may have believed that she or he could voluntarily interact with the devil, or their spirit guide, during visions.

Wilby has suggested that group accounts of the witches' sabbath might have been the product of mutual dreaming. Mutual dreaming normally involves two or more individuals having dreams that contain a high or low level of similarities, known as meshing dreams.³³³ Wilby argues that the mental proximity of the people of Early Modern Scotland would have been very conducive for mutual dreaming to occur,

327 Hutton, 'Shamanism Mapping the Boundaries', in *Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft* 1.2 (2006), p 211

328 Louise Yeoman, 'Away with the Fairies', in *Fantastical Imaginations: the Supernatural in Scottish History and Culture* (ed) Lizanne Henderson (Edinburgh, 2009), p 38.

329 Ibid.

330 For further discussion of the effect of emotional trauma on witchcraft cases see Diane Purkiss, 'Fairies and Incest in Scottish Witchcraft Stories', in *Languages of Witchcraft: Narrative, Ideology, and Meaning in Early Modern Culture* (ed) Stuart Clark (New York, 2001)

331 Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits: Shamanistic Visionary Traditions in Early Modern British Witchcraft and Magic* (Brighton, 2005), pp 218–19.

332 Ibid.

333 Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, p 307.

and might even have encouraged individuals to have meeting dreams.³³⁴ In meeting dreams, two or more dreamers recognise and encounter one another during their dreams.³³⁵ Wilby also argues that one individual could experience a meshing dream where they are unaware of the other person's presence, while the other individual could experience a similar dream as a meeting dream, in which they are aware of their companion's presence.³³⁶

Culture-patterned dreams were those influenced by popular belief and real life experience. Wilby claimed that men and women who experienced culture-patterned dreams and visions were likely to have shared them with others as part of the oral culture of the Early Modern period and, as part of the sharing of these experiences, dream cults could be formed and new members could be introduced through initiatory experiences.³³⁷ Wilby argues that as part of a dream-cult the members would have shared their culture-patterned visionary experiences, and believed that the activities in which they engaged during their visions would have affected the human world.³³⁸

Wilby addresses the discrepancies between group accounts of the witches' sabbath by arguing that such dream experiences would have been similar but not necessarily identical. By relying on the sharing of oral accounts of dream experiences between cult members, Wilby suggests there were functioning dream-cults in Early Modern Scotland.³³⁹ In her dream-cult theory, Wilby plays down the important role of the interrogation process in cross-pollinating details of witches' accounts of the witches' sabbath from one confession to another. However, it could be argued that, in some cases, one individual may have confessed to meeting other witches and the devil because of a visionary

experience they had, but the confessions of the other accused witches may not have been the result of visionary experiences. Instead, the confessions of other witches were more likely to have been indirectly influenced by the visionary experience of one witch through the leading questions of the interrogators.

In the majority of Scottish witches' accounts of the witches' sabbath there is little evidence to suggest that the witches' sabbath was experienced by multiple witches during dreams or visions. Nevertheless, it is important to indicate the possibility that some interrogators would have been aware of the debate among the demonologists about whether the witches were physically present at the witches' sabbath, or whether they were deceived by the devil during dreams. As a result, interrogatory techniques and leading questions might account for some of the cases in which the witches claimed they had travelled to the witches' sabbath during a dream or trance. There does seem to be a belief that the witches' sabbath might have been held in the other world, and this belief may have been influenced by some witches who had real visionary experiences. However, accounts of the witches' sabbath that were influenced by first-hand visionary experiences are likely to be rare, and certainly are not typical among Scottish witches' accounts.

CONCLUSION

Surviving evidence has indicated that the concept of the witches' sabbath did not exist in popular belief before the North Berwick witch-hunt of 1590. Prior to this, the evidence suggests that Scottish witches did not believe that witches gathered together in groups presided over by the devil. This lack of evidence also indicates that the interrogators were ultimately unconcerned with the witches' sabbath prior to the North Berwick witch-hunt. After this event, however, the elite interrogators began to fear that witches acted in groups, and they came to regard the

334 Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, p 510.

335 *Ibid.*, p 513.

336 *Ibid.*, p 514.

337 *Ibid.*, p 518–19.

338 *Ibid.*, p 532.

339 *Ibid.*, p 516–20.

witches' sabbath as a tool that would allow them to encourage accused witches to name their accomplices.

Only rarely was the witches' sabbath mentioned during witness statements, and this supports the argument that the witches' sabbath was an elite concept introduced to witches during the interrogation process. Although the idea of the witches' sabbath was likely to have been introduced initially by the interrogators, the witches themselves influenced the descriptions of the witches' gatherings. In many accounts of the Scottish witches' sabbath there is surprisingly little focus on the demonological material that dominated learned discussions about the event. The devil's presence at the witches' sabbath was almost always confirmed, but Scottish evidence indicates that devil worship, maleficium and instruction in magic rarely featured in witches' accounts of the witches' sabbath. Indeed, in most cases the interrogators appear to have been primarily concerned with confirming the witches' presence at the witches' sabbath, and using these confessions to coerce the witches into identifying their accomplices.

Many Scottish witches constructed their descriptions of the witches' sabbath by drawing heavily on popular belief about fairies and their practices. These accused witches believed that witches would have held their gatherings at important fairy times, and on the boundaries of the supernatural landscape inhabited by fairies and other spirit beings. The descriptions the accused witches gave of witches' gatherings were closely comparable to accounts of fairy gatherings, and some accused witches also seem to have believed that the witches' sabbath would have been held in the other world. In some cases, the witches also appear to have drawn inspiration for their confessions from real life experiences at festive celebrations.

The reliance on folkloric material and real life experience to describe the witches' sabbath is an indication that the witches did not have any distinct belief in the witches' sabbath

itself. When witches were asked to describe the witches' sabbath they chose to draw on familiar fairy folklore to answer the questions posed to them by the interrogators. The interrogators, with seemingly little concern for encouraging witches to include demonological material in their accounts of the witches' sabbath, allowed the witches to incorporate their own beliefs and experiences into their descriptions of the witches' sabbath, and as such, the Scottish witches' sabbath was a fusion of popular belief within an elite concept. The discrepancies between group accounts of the witches' sabbath have indicated that the majority of accounts were a product of leading questions and the witches' imaginations. Most of the women and men accused of witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland are unlikely to have self-consciously identified themselves as witches and, as such, they would not have identified themselves with other witches who met together at the witches' sabbath. Instead, the accused witches, encouraged by the interrogators questions, constructed imaginary confessions in which they travelled to, and participated in, the witches' sabbath.

In a much smaller number of cases, it is possible that some witches described the witches' sabbath based on memories of a visionary experience. Visionary experiences produced during dreams or trances were likely to have been experienced on an individual basis, but in some cases the visionary experiences of one accused witch could have indirectly affected the confessions of her supposed accomplices. The accounts of the witches' sabbath that may be attributed to visionary experiences also appear to draw much of their inspiration from fairy folklore and belief in the other world. Both the imaginary accounts of the accused witches who never believed that they had visited the witches' sabbath, and the accounts of the witches who had visionary experiences in which they attended a witches' sabbath, or a similar gathering, were constructed using similar culture-patterned beliefs that existed within popular imagination.

The study of the witches' sabbath has always been notoriously problematic for historians. The problems associated with the interrogation process, and the desperate search for the supposed secret confederacy of witches who were believed to have infiltrated Early Modern society, encouraged interrogators to use the witches' sabbath as a tool to identify members of this perceived conspiracy. However, as this research demonstrates, the Scottish witches were not silently consenting to leading questions, but taking an active role in the formulation of descriptions of the witches'

sabbaths, and the beliefs and experiences of many accused witches are very apparent within their confessions.

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