The Basque Witch Craze and the Spanish Inquisition

In the early seventeenth century, the Spanish Inquisitional tribunal of Logroño was plagued by a rise in witchcraft complaints from the Basque region. In order to maintain orthodoxy in the area, catholic missionaries were dispatched, and the local tribunal staged a large public persecution of six village witches. These efforts merely generated further hysteria, which sparked a dream epidemic and hundreds of accusations. Under orders from the Supreme Council in Madrid, Inquisitor Alonso de Salazar undertook a detailed investigation of the persecutions. His reports uncovered the source of the crimes to be lies, deception and fear. The Craze ended with the acquittal of all alleged witches, and the hysteria eventually burnt out.

The Basque Witch Craze was the only full scale witch panic to have occurred in Spanish history. This aberrational phenomenon can be attributed to a number of causative factors, most notably the efforts of the Spanish Inquisition to eradicate witchcraft in the region. When analyzing the craze it is possible to align the rise and fall in hysteria with the actions of the Inquisition, or rather, the instruments of the Inquisition at its furthest frontiers. The initial efforts of the Logroño Tribunal in 1610 to eradicate witchcraft were a disaster. They attempted to re-institute the Christian faith in the populace through preaching and extreme religiosity. The second, renewed effort of the Inquisition to end the Craze had a more pragmatic basis. Alonso de Salazar succeeded in eliminating witchcraft in the area without resorting to the sensationalist propaganda of his predecessors, and enforced a culture of inquisitional integrity and accountability.

The context of the Basque witch craze was a period of great changes in the Spanish Inquisition, and the prelude to these developments must be considered. The organization was established in 1478 at the behest of the new ‘Catholic Monarchs’ of Spain, Isabella of Castille and Ferdinand of Aragon, to ensure the religious integrity of their Dominion\(^1\). Although initially authorized by Pope Sixtus IV, the Inquisition was essentially controlled by the Spanish Crown, and appeals to Rome were not

\(^1\) Simon Lemieux, “The Spanish Inquisition” History Review (Dec 2002), 44.
permitted. The Inquisition was controlled by La Suprema, an eight man Supreme Council of royal appointees, led by the Inquisitor General. Spain was functionally divided into eighteen regions, headed by tribunals located in the major cities, as well as superficially divided between the ‘sectariates’ of Castile and Aragon. The tribunals consisted of three Inquisitors, who were informed and assisted by local ‘familiars’. The main prerogatives of the Inquisition were to impose religious uniformity, safeguard good Catholics from heresy, wipe out insincere conversions from Judaism and Islam (known as conversos and moriscos), and prevent moral backsliding.

Witchcraft was never a fundamental concern in the early years of the Inquisition. The arch-Catholic, conservative theologians of the Iberian Peninsula mandatorily studied the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), who makes no reference to witches or demonology in his teachings. Very few authoritative works on witchcraft made their way to Spain or Portugal, but those that did were viewed critically by the Church. The Malleus Maleficarum was not tolerated, and fell under the Inquisitions list of prohibited literature. Any witchcraft accusations were dealt with by the secular and Episcopal courts, and the few heretical cases that were referred to the Inquisition were reviewed so thoroughly that the Inquisition was sometimes credited with ‘saving’ witches.

However, after the successful eradication of conversos and moriscos by the mid sixteenth century, the Inquisition discovered a new target for persecution; Catholic Spaniards accused of moral crimes.

Monter describes this phase as the ‘Aragonese Century’ of the Inquisition, due to the radical increase in

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2 Ibid., 44.
5 Lemieux, The Spanish Inquisition, 44.
6 Ibid., 46.
7 Henningsen, The Salazar Documents, 12.
8 Ibid., 12.
10 Henningsen, The Salazar Documents, 10-12.
11 Lemieux, The Spanish Inquisition, 46.
and imbalance in executions in the Sectariate of Aragon, particularly between 1570 and 1625 \(^1\). A departure in traditional offenses was categorically reflected by different Northern tribunals; the coastal town of Barcelona was plagued by Protestant foreigners and bigamists, Valencian magnates and their Moorish subjects were accused of sodomy and bestiality, and the Logroño tribunal encountered a steady rise in witchcraft accusations \(^2\) (see Figure 1).

Despite fluctuating trends in persecutions, the Witchcraft Policy of the Inquisition remained unchanged, and appeared to be primarily concerned with securing justice for those involved. The criterion for execution was comparatively stricter than elsewhere in Europe, with a number of safeguards against bias and unscrupulous convictions \(^3\). The Inquisition was not in the habit of burning witches at the stake, and the Logroño executions of 1610 were the first to be officially permitted since 1526 \(^4\). After the questionable burning of a Zaragoza witch in 1535, the Inquisition had tightened the laws and only a unanimous tribunal decision could permit the death sentence \(^5\). Other criterion stipulated that no witch accused solely by another witch could be arrested or condemned, and that Inquisitors should take into consideration any torture that had occurred at the hands of another court \(^6\). Although the Basque Witch Craze was an anomaly in Spanish terms, circumstantial features render the incident unsurprising. At a time when the Inquisition was developing broader moral conquests, the Basques were an obviously vulnerable target. They were considered a culturally backward people, as they were economically impoverished, ethnically distinct from the rest of Spain, and spoke their own language. They lived in small villages in the foothills of the Pyrenees and shared a

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\(^2\) Nader, Frontiers of Heresy by William Monter, 690.


\(^4\) Henningsen, The Salazar Documents, 10.

\(^5\) Monter, Frontiers of Heresy, 264.

\(^6\) Ibid, 261.
common heritage with the French Basques on the other side\textsuperscript{18}. Gifford raises the possibility that the persecutions were a result, or at least influenced by, racial prejudices held at the time\textsuperscript{19}.

The complex anatomy of the Basque Witch Craze can be divided and analyzed in three stages. The initial phase began circa 1609 and consisted of an increase in village witch trials and persecutions, the prelude to the \textit{auto de fe}. The second was the actual witch panic; it began with the \textit{auto de fe} of November 1610, and a resulting exponential increase in hysteria and accusations. The third phase was the eventual wind down of events, a rise in skepticism within the higher ranks of the Inquisition, and the effective eradication of witchcraft in Spain in an official sense.

In the small villages of the Northern Basque Navarra, witch-belief had existed as an oral tradition for many years, in the same form as in many other isolated European populations\textsuperscript{20}. Henningsen describes this belief as socially functional. It fulfills a cognitive purpose in explaining why certain phenomenon occur, it acts as a moral system to discourage undesirable social behavior, and as a ‘safety valve’ outlet for latent aggression\textsuperscript{21}. The term ‘\textit{malos vecinos}’ translates to ‘bad neighbours’ and in the Basque region this phrase was synonymous with ‘\textit{bruja}’, meaning ‘witch’\textsuperscript{22}. The Basque concept of witchcraft was characterized as \textit{maleficium}, harmful, petty magic, which had no reference to diabolism, which was unheard of in the area\textsuperscript{23}.

However in 1609, the commonplace existence of witch-belief was sensationalized due to developments on the other side of the Pyrenees. The Spanish villages of Zugarramundi and Urdax were only one mile from the French region of Labourd, which was in the midst of a tremendous witch panic. The infamous judge Pierre De Lancre had been charged by Henry IV of France to conduct an

\textsuperscript{18} Gifford, \textit{Witchcraft and the Problem of Evil in a Basque Village}, 16.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 16.
\textsuperscript{20} Gustav Henningsen, \textit{The Witches’ Advocate} (Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 1980), 392
\textsuperscript{21} Henningsen, \textit{The Salazar Documents}, 47.
\textsuperscript{22} Gifford, \textit{Witchcraft and the Problem of Evil in a Basque Village}, 12.
\textsuperscript{23} The Report of the Bishop of Pamplona, 1\textsuperscript{st} April 1611, in Henningsen, \textit{The Salazar Documents}, 206.
extensive witch hunt, and was responsible for the arrest and execution of around 600 French men and women. Refugees were forced across the frontier and made their way to the Basque villages of Navarra, bringing elaborate and fearful stories. Tales filtered across the Pyrenees of the witches’ Sabbat, the devil, and night flight, all new phenomenons to the culturally isolated Basques.

In Zugarramundi there existed an unpopular family at the time, commonly regarded as *malos vecinos*. It is unknown why they were disliked, only that the family consisted of a 66 year old shepard, his son, daughter in law, and her mother. Most of the neighbouring villages had similar groups of ostracized individuals, and as rumours spread from the Pays de Labourd, community objection to these unfortunate persons intensified. Local familiars informed the Spanish Inquisition of the social developments in the area, and the new association of witchcraft with the devil attracted the concern of the authorities. The interpretation of witchcraft as ‘anti-religion’ evoked the moral outrage of the Inquisition, and led them to seek punitive action. A number of *malos vecinos* were arrested as witches by the Logroño Inquisitor Juan de Valle Alvavado, on the basis of a long suspected history of magical crimes.

Of the Zugarramundi *malos vecinos*, confessions for a spectrum of *maleficent* acts were extracted. Miguel de Goiburu, the old shepard, claimed to have killed his niece 30 years prior, and to have drunk her blood, causing her body to become covered in black marks. He had also murdered a one year old girl, whose father had been a bad intermediary in buying some cattle. Between them, Goiburu’s family confessed to a further 16 infanticides, 11 adult murders, and other non fatal crimes such as causing a woman to have severe angina for twelve days in retribution for stealing a loaf of

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bread. Despite the depravity of these crimes, none of them contained elements of diabolism.

On the 27th January, 1609, the family was incarcerated at the Logroño Tribunal’s secret prison, and on 13th February La Suprema was informed of what had transpired. Around about the same time in February, three men and three women traveled from Zugarramundi to Logroño, to inform the Inquisitors they were not witches, but had been threatened with violence to make false confessions. The Tribunal forced them to wait in the town for a reply, and eventually imprisoned them as well. On the 11th March, La Suprema dispatched instructions to Logroño to proceed in a thorough investigation of the area and its pertaining archives, in order to uncover any details regarding a possible witch sect. The letter was accompanied by a questionnaire which was an intended outline for thorough cross examining of all outside witnesses as well as accused.

Between March 1609 and November 1610, the Logroño Inquisitors were mired in paperwork, trials, confessions, and a mass of subsequent accusations. Inquisitor Valle, upon instruction from La Suprema, investigated Zugarramundi, Urdax, and the other border regions, and returned to Logroño with a seventeen new prisoners. These were in addition to another sixteen witches the Tribunal had been forced to jail in order to satisfy local village authorities, and the ‘secret prisons’ were soon overcrowded. The majority of the prisoners were charged solely with being members of a sect, rather than any traditional crimes of maleficium. In June 1909 La Suprema, dissatisfied with the pace of the proceedings, sent the young Inquisitor Alonso de Salazar to join the Logroño Tribunal, and alleviate the bureaucratic load of the two senior Inquisitors. Being new to the area and the youngest of the Inquisitors, Salazar was loathe to criticize the opinions of his superiors, and had little influence in the

29 Gifford, Witchcraft and the Problem of Evil in a Basque Village, 13.
30 An account of the Persons to be Brought Forth at the Auto de fe on 7th November 1610 in Henningsen, The Salazar Documents, 104-145.
31 Henningsen, The Salazar Documents, 48.
32 The Inquisition Council’s Instructions to the Tribunal at Logroño Concerning the Visitation and Edict of Grace to the Witches, Madrid, 26th March 1611, in Henningsen, The Salazar Documents, 240-249.
33 Henningsen, The Salazar Documents, 23.
On the last day of October 1610, a letter was written to King Phillip III of Spain, addressing the issue of the alleged ‘Witches Sect’ in the Pyrenees, crediting the actions of the Inquisition in preventing its further spread, and inviting the King to the coming auto de fe\textsuperscript{34}. Salazar managed to divert the course of this letter, which never reached the King, but he had less success in salvaging the fates of the accused witches.

Precisely one week later, the Logroño Tribunal staged the only auto de fe to be held in Spain, to pronounce the judgements of 31 witches, before publicly punishing them as deserved. The spectacle was attended by over 30,000 people who traveled from the surrounding regions. It began with the announcement of the existence of the Devil’s secret sect in the area, and the listing of the various confessions and sins of those who claimed to be involved. The first eighteen witches were then pardoned, as they had voluntarily confessed and repented their deeds. Their punishment was generally confiscation of property, imprisonment, exile, or the forced wearing of a penitential robe for a prescribed period\textsuperscript{35}. Two clerical witches had been sentenced to death but were at the last minute pardoned, to avoid scandal\textsuperscript{36}. The final eleven witches were sentenced to death at the stake, as they had denied their guilt to the end\textsuperscript{37}. Five of these had died of typhoid whilst imprisoned, and so their papier-maché figures were burnt in effigy\textsuperscript{38}. Of the six persons that received the death penalty, none belonged to the original group of malos vecinos\textsuperscript{39}.

The effect of the auto de fe was catastrophic. It served to officially confirm what was

\begin{itemize}
  \item Letter from the Inquisitors to Phillip III, Logroño, 31\textsuperscript{st} October 1610, in Henningsen, The Salazar Documents, 102.
  \item Lemieux, The Spanish Inquisition, 46.
  \item Henningsen, The Salazar Documents, 100.
  \item An account of the Persons to be Brought Forth at the Auto de fe on 7\textsuperscript{th} November 1610 in Henningsen, The Salazar Documents, 138-140.
  \item An account of the Persons to be Brought Forth at the Auto de fe on 7\textsuperscript{th} November 1610 in Henningsen, The Salazar Documents, 138.
  \item Gifford, Witchcraft and the Problem of Evil in a Basque Village, 15.
\end{itemize}
previously only rumoured in afflicted villages, and for those that came from further abroad, it
presented an entirely new idea. To the Basques, the reading of the sentence erased any doubt, and
proved that the existence of the Devil’s sect was a feared and true reality. One of the spectators was
recorded to have remarked ‘having listened to so many ghastly monstrosities...we returned to our
several homes, crossing ourselves the while’ 40.

Shortly after the auto de fe, at the request of Logroño Inquisitors Valle and Becerra, Catholic
missionaries were dispatched to the area. Franciscan and Jesuit representatives preached elaborate
sermons warning against heresy and instilling an intense fear of the Devil in the populace, offered
local villagers protection from the Devil, and assisted in the further interrogation of witches 41. This
effort to renew orthodoxy backfired completely, and purely intensified the newly inspired hysteria in
the wake of the auto de fe. Salazar accompanied some of the expeditions and reported that one
particular Franciscan, Fray Domingo de Sardo, ‘preached so suggestively...that a young girl among the
congregation believed she was carried off to the local witches’ sabbat and thus missed the rest of the
monk’s sermon’ 42.

By early 1911 the fear of the Basques had grown into complete panic, which adopted some
curious characteristics from the Pays de Labourd witch craze. The panic presented itself in the form of
a dream epidemic, afflicting predominantly children, who believed they were taken from their beds
each night to attend the devil’s sabbat in nearby forests or fields. This outbreak of stereotyped
dreams occurred almost uniformly across the region. In the town of Vera de Bisadoa it was reported
that around 40 children were so terrified of being taken up by the devil, that the parish priest permit
them to sleep in the hall of his house. Each night he blessed them before they slept, until one night he

40 Ibid, pp 100 **
41 Henningsen, The Salazar Documents, 51.
forgot, and they were all carried off to the sabbat and punished. Age appeared to be the pre-
determinant of guilt in the epidemic, as slightly older children were given responsibilities such as
taking the younger children from their beds or watching over herds of toads. Adults, it would seem,
acted entirely of their own volition and were therefore culpable sinners.

The bewitched children claimed to recognize other villagers at the sabbat, particularly older
women who took them from their beds, and denounced these to the authorities as witches. Several
distinct sects, known as *aquelarres*, were identified to be surrounding the villages (see figure 2). This
influx of accusations was accompanied by an increase in Inquisitional proceedings, notably the use of
torture in forcing confessions. The Inquisition procured adult confessions through traditional means;
the strappado, rope torture, water torture (in the village of Lesaca they used holy water to exorcise
the witches), and denial of the sacraments of the church. Other makeshift varieties were used by
locals to force others to turn themselves in, such as tying the accused to a tree for nights on end or
freezing their feet in buckets of water. Children, though generally considered passive victims of the
epidemic, were also forced into accusations. Vagrant peasant boys were made hungry and then
bribed with food, one girl was stripped naked by a Jesuit monk and then pricked with pins to see if she
was a witch, and young children were confined for days in darkened rooms, whipped, or made to sit
next to hot cauldrons until they confessed.

When the craze reached its peak in the summer of 1611, the violence in the population had

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43 Gifford, *Witchcraft and the Problem of Evil in a Basque Village*, pp 12
44 An account of the Persons to be Brought Forth at the Auto de fe on 7th November 1610 in Henningsen, *The Salazar Documents*, 112.
45 Maps showing the *aquelarres* discovered in Northern Navarra and Guipúzcoa by 9th March 1611, in Henningsen, *The Witches Advocate*, 215.
46 Second Report of Salazar to the Inquisitor General, 220.
claimed several lives and the prisons were overflowing. Salazar’s documentations reveal that 1,721 witches had made confessions, and these had denounced roughly 5,000 others. Notwithstanding the overlap in repetitive accusations, these are still staggering statistics, given the estimated population of Spanish Navarra was less than 10,000 people.

On the 9th March, 1611, the Logroño Tribunal informed La Suprema of developments, explaining that the witch plague was particularly bad in a belt stretching from the Baztán valley to west of San Sebastián. However the Inquisitor General had been receiving other accounts from the area, and had lost faith in Valle and Becerra to effectively manage the situation. He issued instructions for Salazar to conduct a renewed investigation of events, and administer an Edict of Grace to the region. This offered accused witches the chance to make a full confession in order to be re-admitted to the Catholic Church, and exempted them from further punishments.

Since the 1609 Zugarramundi persecutions, Salazar had been dubious of the integrity of his fellow inquisitors, but unable to voice his suspicions or effectively persuade his opposition. With the authority to voice his skepticism, Salazar conducted an objective, pragmatic, and astonishingly comprehensive study of the entire craze, beginning with a reassessment of the Zugarramundi malos vecinos.

The Salazar documents revealed inadequacies in the interrogation of the malos vecinos, and significant evidence that the father had instructed his son to lie in order to evade punishment. To make sense of the dream epidemic and aquelarres, Salazar undertook a series of interviews which

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51 Henningsen, The Salazar Documents, 80.
52 Henningsen, The Salazar Documents, 25.
53 The Inquisition Council’s Instructions to the Tribunal at Logroño Concerning the Visitation and Edict of Grace to the Witches, 240-249.
54 Lemieux, The Spanish Inquisition, 46.
highlighted numerous inconsistencies between superficially cohesive accounts. He analyzed the witches’ testimonies with a complex schema that made important distinctions between polar opposites such as ‘asleep’ and ‘awake’, and ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’.\(^{56}\) This removed any theological preconceptions and allowed him to make a purely objective assessment of the evidence at hand.

Young girls who claimed to have fornicated with the devil were examined by midwives, and found to be virgins\(^ {57} \). A examination of confiscated flying ointments, powders, and ‘dressed toads’ proved that none of these objects had magical properties, even when some potion was imbibed by one over zealous volunteer\(^ {58} \). Witches from the same aquelarre were taken to the fields and asked to point out features of the sabbat, such as where the devil’s throne was. Generally these results were discovered to be conflicting\(^ {59} \).

Salazar concluded from his findings that the events confessed by the witches had in fact, never occurred. He presented a body of evidence to La Suprema which proved that ‘the supposed sect was nothing but a chimera’, a phenomenon generated entirely by hysteria\(^ {60} \). He criticized the propaganda of the missionaries, and advised that the remedy for witchcraft was ‘silence and discretion’, as public condemnation was likely to cause ‘greater and more widespread damage’\(^ {61} \). In 1613 La Suprema responded to Salazar’s testimony by enforcing further restrictions on witchcraft persecutions, which permanently ended the custom in Spain\(^ {62} \).

Overall, the Inquisition was responsible for the general paucity of witches and witch hunting in Spanish history. Of the 1,721 accused Basque witches, the majority were acquitted or received

\(^{56}\) Henningsen, The Salazar Documents, 90.

\(^{57}\) Second Report of Salazar to the Inquisitor General, 300.


\(^{59}\) Fourth Report of Salazar to the Inquisitor General, Logroño, 3\(^ {rd} \) October 1613, in Henningsen, The Salazar Documents, 400.


\(^{61}\) Second Report of Salazar to the Inquisitor General, 342

\(^{62}\) The Instructions Issued by the Council for Dealing with Witchcraft Cases, Madrid, 29\(^ {th} \) August 1614, in Henningsen, The Salazar Documents, 472-490
lenient sentences, excluding the five executions at the *auto de fe*. This was negligible in comparison with *conservative* estimates of 500,000 victims in other European countries, where the courts had a higher propensity to send witches to the stake\(^63\). The restriction of the Basque witch craze can therefore be attributed the efficacy (albeit delayed) of the Inquisition in restraining the disorder, and the bureaucratic hurdles preventing the death sentence in the majority of cases.

The chaos in Spanish Navarra had subsided completely by 1613. At Salazar’s behest, the alleged witches were re-admitted to receive the sacraments of the Church, reviving Catholic faith in the region\(^64\). Without the interference of authorities, the craze proved to have an inherent capacity for self-regulation. In order to prevent a total break down of society, parents stopped believing the testimonies of their children\(^65\). Once the propaganda ceased, so did the accusations, as Salazar famously declared ‘there were neither witches nor bewitched in a village until they were talked and written about’\(^66\). It can be duly concluded that the anomaly of the Basque witch craze was originally instigated by futile attempts of the Inquisition to maintain orthodoxy in the area.


\(^{64}\) *Certificate of the Witch Catalina de Echevarría*, in Henningsen, *The Witches’ Advocate*, 265. This certificate stated that the recipient had been trialed and reconciled by the Inquisition, and were no longer banished from receiving Holy Communion or other sacraments.


\(^{66}\) *Second Report of Salazar to the Inquisitor General*, 342.


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**PRIMARY SOURCES**


**SECONDARY SOURCES**


Analysis of traditional witches unguents with modern techniques has proved that some ingredients, such as toad’s vomit and certain fungus, do in fact contain hallucinogenic properties that may be related to the concept of night-flight. However modern analytical resources were not available to Salazar, and the items confiscated may indeed have been forgeries as claimed.


