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The Witch Hunt of the Little Ice Age

by

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Abstract

The Little Ice Age that ran its course from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries saw witch hunting at a very high scale with tens of thousands burnt on stake accused of causing crop failure and famine by inviting unseasonal hailstorms from hell. Both the secular and the religious authorities, under pressure to find the causes of rapidly changing meteorological events beyond the understanding of the period, could only point fingers at the old hapless women living on the margins of the societies denounced as witches that were supposed to hold powers to influence the weather. It was only much later in the seventeenth century that science, and law, intervened to save the lives of these innocent women. Fortunately, in the current period of global warming deep scientific understanding of the unfolding meteorological events would at least ensure that there is no witch hunting.

Key words: Climate change, Little Ice Age, Witch hunt

One of the worst periods in recent history has been the Middle Ages that witnessed selective killing of tens of thousands of old hapless women condemned as witches across the continent of Europe. For long the practitioners of witchcraft had claimed weather making abilities, in particular hailstorm, and by extension, the ability to stop hailstorms at will. This earned them some sustenance when the farmers approached old frail women living in dark rundown houses on the fringe of the settlements to prevent hailstorms from destroying their crops. And nobody seemed to mind when the claimed prowess did not yield the expected results. It was easy to attribute failures to the fading powers of an old woman. Little did they realize that this very claim would take thousands of old women to the burning stakes when the earth began getting cold again.

There are varied estimates of when the last major climate change, the Little Ice Age, actually began. By general consensus this period could be taken to begin from the thirteenth century AD to the mid eighteenth century. Even though the average temperature difference at the peak of the Little Ice Age was barely 1 degree Celsius below the earth's average surface temperature at the beginning of the changes it changed the human destiny in ways that would have appeared implausible before. In the year 963 AD Greenland was actually green enough with a large population for the Pope to have appointed a Bishop at its southern tip to provide religious services to the booming economy and also to add the brave, but heathen, Vikings to the burgeoning Christianity of that era.

This warm period also saw vine yards throughout England and Northern France and a booming agriculture economy. But as the Little Ice Age advanced agricultural productions dwindled and vines stopped yielding grapes. The English had to turn to Spain and Southern France for their quota of the heady liquor. The collapse of the booming agriculture turned the English into a navy based nation of merchants that began scouring the distant tropical lands across the seas for riches rather than creating wealth within. The central blame for slavery of an entire people and of colonisation elsewhere would perhaps one day be placed on the freezing climate of the thirteenth century.

But that is for another occasion! Now we are looking at the circumstances that led to the organized burning of a large number of old women across a continent. In those war torn societies, women who survived child bearing age lived long but were often not fortunate enough to have surviving male family members to support them in old age. Bitter and raging against injustices, isolated abodes of these old women dotted the landscape of the European villages. People feared them for their presumed abilities to use devil to kill and harm. And these women also saw the fear they endangered as a protective shell, a route to some status and recognition. Many willingly assumed the calling of witchcraft thrust on them and the more aggressive among them would not hesitate to flaunt their witchhood credentials.

As the Little Ice Age deepened climatic anomalies of nature hitherto unknown or at least infrequent, began occurring with increasing frequency. Meteorological changes left their footprints across the globe and hailstorms became very frequent. One of the widely reported thunderstorm that hit almost the entire central Europe occurred on August 3, 1562. It brought darkness at noon and destroyed houses, crops and vineyards killing birds and cattle over thousands of square kilometres. The severity was such that the devout thought that the Last Judgement had begun. Famine followed the destruction of crops and the resultant poverty forced mass migration within and across the continents.

These changes in nature appeared so out of tune that they were considered unnatural. And since they caused large damage to the economy of this period and enormous misery, people sought explanation from the two main pillars of the society of that time, the State and the Church. There were no canonical laws in existence that could have explained the excessive hailstorms as the work of Devil and hold his human associates guilty and, therefore, the Church, by and large, stood aside except for some isolated churches, mostly in the remote Alps, where the local priest would sometime convince himself and others in his parish that the cause of their pain and destruction, the frequent hailstorms, were being caused by old witches working in tandem with the Devil and it is in these remote parishes that the witch hunts first began.

With advancing Ice Age the destruction of crops, famine and diseases began invading the human settlements with increased destructive force and the Church also came under pressure to find

solution to justify their pre-eminence in the name of God. In popular perception hailstorms were already demonic handiwork of the witches and, with increasing pressure to pinpoint the cause, the Church succumbed and in 1484 Pope Innocence VIII acknowledged that weather was indeed being made by witches giving an indirect sanction to the floodgate of witch hunt that then went far beyond the isolated Alpine hamlets and engulfed large parts of Central and Southern Europe. Perhaps the largest legalized massacre occurred in the territory of Wiesensteig of Helfenstein where 63 women were burnt as witches in 1563 alone.

This mayhem, however, also served to arouse the compassion of many Churches across Europe who could clearly see the responsibility for unusual weather were more likely in the sun than in sin. Fortunately this was also a period when science had started taking hold in parts of Europe and many, influenced by science, wrote against holding witchcraft responsible for climatic excesses. One of them was Johann Weyer, a physician in the court of Duke Wilhelm of Julich-Kleve who used logic to prove that a woman, even if a witch, could not cause weather storm.

Others in the Courts of Counts and Kings across the continent used law to renounce witch hunt arguing that even if it was possible for witches to change the course of nature and cause hailstorms and destructions as accepted by Pope Innocence VIII, none of the laws, all made by God, imposed capital punishment for such acts. A combination of science and law thus came to the rescue of old hapless women living alone in isolation and by the late seventeenth century witch hunting had largely stopped. Surly old women on the outskirts of the villages could live their days in peace once again.

Fortunately for us we are living through the current climate change in a period when science does not allow the veil of ignorance to last long. Except if you are Bjorn Lomborg!

Witches need not fear this climate change.

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