



ST. MARY THE VIRGIN

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Superstitions from the Middle Ages

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INTRODUCTION

Superstitions from the Middle Ages



Those who lived in the Middle Ages had a lot to fear. They didn't have answers for all the mysteries of the world and being the enlightened people they were, they wanted answers. In some cases, those answers came from myths, in others it simply came from a desperate need to explain bad situations. Strangely enough, many of the most well-known superstitions today owe their origins to ones born during the Middle Ages (and earlier).

The medieval church had always been concerned about superstition. In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries—the waning years, as some would have it, of the European Middle Ages—certain theologians and other clerical authorities became obsessed with it. Authors from Iberia to the Low Countries and from Paris to Vienna turned their attention to this topic, and particularly in the first half of the 1400s a wave of tracts and treatises explicitly *de superstitionibus* issued from their pens. For these men, superstition was a serious error, not the typically harmless foolishness that modern use of the term tends to convey. In the theology of the age, *superstitio* meant most basically an excess of religion, literally “religion observed beyond proper measure.” Since human beings could not possibly offer a superabundance of proper worship beyond what God, in his perfection, de-served, this excess necessarily implied improper religious rites and observances. Superstition meant either performing elements of the divine cult incorrectly or, worse still, offering worship to entities other than the Deity.



Events related to unlucky 13

On Friday, October 13, 1307, the arrest of the Knights Templar was ordered by Philip IV of France. While the number 13 was considered unlucky, Friday the 13th was not considered unlucky at the time. The incorrect idea that their arrest was related to the phobias surrounding Friday the 13th was invented early in the 21st century and popularized by the novel *The Da Vinci Code*.

Apollo 13 was launched on April 11, 1970 at 13:13:00 CST and suffered an oxygen tank explosion on April 13 at 21:07:53 CST. It returned safely to Earth on April 17.

Fear of the Number 13

The belief that the number 13 is cursed or bad luck largely had a religious reasoning in the Middle Ages. There were 13 people in attendance at the Last Supper and therefore it was believed that 13 people at a gathering was a bad omen.

The superstition became even more pronounced as time went on. Since Judas was the first to get up from the table at the Last Supper and he was the one to kill Jesus, it stood to reason that the first person to get up from a table of 13 people would be met with bad luck. Many believed that if a party was held for 13 people, whoever was the first to get up would be dead within the year.

With this superstition, people of the Middle Ages ensured that there would never be 13 people gathered together. In fact, by the 16th century it was claimed a person was a witch if they had 13 people together. Some witch hunters would claim they had seen 13 people in a gathering and therefore proved that the witch was working with the Devil.

The Christians were not the only ones with a fear of 13 either. The Romans believed that the number 13 was an omen that foretold bad luck and death. The Vikings also believed 13 to be an evil number because there

was a myth about a banquet held for the 12 gods. Then Loki, the trickster showed up uninvited and caused the death of one of the more beloved gods, Balder.

TRISKAIDEKAPHOBIA is fear or avoidance of the number 13. It is also a reason for the fear of Friday the 13th, called *paraskevidekatriaphobia*. The term was used as early as in 1910 by Isador Coriat in *Abnormal Psychology*.

Seven Years Bad Luck for Breaking a Mirror

The superstition surrounding breaking a mirror did not start in the Middle Ages, but it was strengthened by it. In the 15th century, Venice, Italy manufactured mirrors for the wealthy. These mirrors were made of glass and backed by silver, which made them extraordinarily expensive. It was the common belief that if a servant were to break a mirror that they would never be able to repay the owner and would instead have to spend seven years as an indentured servant.

But the fear of breaking a mirror had already been in the culture prior to the Middle Ages. In ancient Greece it was believed that a person's reflection was a representation of their soul. If their reflection appeared distorted (in a bowl of water or in a stream) then it was believed that disaster would strike. Distorting a reflection in any way was believed to harm soul.

The Romans believed that breaking a mirror was bad luck and it was punishable by seven years of bad luck. The Romans believed that life came in seven year cycles and therefore breaking a mirror would mean that a person would have to wait to be renewed after seven years. Some beliefs held that if a person was ill they could break a mirror and suffer the seven years bad luck, after which they would be renewed and healthy again.



Figure 1 15th century woman holding a mirror

There were some remedies to breaking a mirror. Some believed that the bad luck could be washed away by putting the pieces in water or burying them in the moonlight. Others suggested pounding the pieces into dust or leaving the mirror where it broke for 7 hours before cleaning it up. For a servant in the Middle Ages, these methods would not spare them the wrath of their master however. In the 16th century, a much cheaper way to produce mirrors was found but by then the bad omens associated with breaking a mirror were too much a part of culture and they persisted.

Lucky Horseshoe

There are a few reasons why people of the Medieval period believed that horseshoes were lucky. The first was that they were made of iron, a metal that was long believed to ward off evil spirits. The other reason comes from the legend that is told about Saint Dunstan in the 10th century. It was said that that Dunstan worked as a blacksmith and one day the Devil came into his shop. Dunstan pretended not to recognize him and went about getting horseshoes for the Devil's horse.



Figure 2 Representation of Dunstan and the Devil

The horseshoe would need to be nailed over the door with iron nails. There is some debate about the orientation of the horseshoe. Some believe that the horseshoe should point up so as to prevent the luck from spilling out of the horseshoe. Others believe that it should point down so that the luck can be poured upon those who enter the home. Horseshoes were also nailed to the masts of sailing ships in the belief that it would help avoid storms.

Historic Sneezes

In Ancient Greece, sneezes were believed to be prophetic signs from the gods. In 401 BC, for instance, the Athenian general Xenophon gave a speech exhorting his fellow soldiers to fight against the Persians. A soldier underscored his conclusion with a sneeze. Thinking that this sneeze was a favorable sign from the gods, the soldiers were impressed. Another divine moment of sneezing for the Greeks occurs in the story of Odysseus. His waiting wife Penelope, hearing Odysseus may be alive, says that he and his son would take revenge on the suitors if he were to return. At that moment, their son sneezes loudly and Penelope laughs with joy, reassured that it is a sign from the gods (Odyssey 17: 541-550).

Sneezing Out the Soul

One of the most well-known superstitions that is believed to come out of the Middle Ages is the need to say “bless you” after someone sneezes. There are actually a few different reasons for why sneezing was such a dire situation for those in the Middle Ages. The first and most common being that it was the time of illness and the plague, if a person sneezed it was a possible sign that they might be the next to die.

Additionally, there was the belief that sneezing gave the Devil the opportunity to enter the body and therefore the person who sneezed needed the help of God and the church to get him out. Saying “God bless you” was believed to be a way to keep the Devil from entering the body and therefore save the person who had sneezed. It was a way to explain the death that would sometimes occur after a person sneezed and give people the sense that they could do something to help since not everyone had access to a doctor.

There was also the prevailing belief that by a person could sneeze out their soul. This was also counteracted by a person saying “God bless you” or covering the face in order to keep the soul in. This superstition was help with the spread of illness during a time where there was little way to help people overcome some of the more devastating illnesses. Since most people were unable to afford to contact a doctor, anything that could be done to help a person avoid becoming sick or losing their soul was quickly latched onto by the populace.

The Royal Touch

Another way that peasants were able to try and get help for their ills was the healing hand of the monarch. It was believed that the monarch was giving healing powers as proof their divine right to rule. As the need for the monarch’s healing touch grew, special coins were created and touched by the monarch. It was believed that these coins, called angels, had the same healing powers as the King.

French tradition, on the other hand, has King Philip I initiating it in the 11th century. In medieval times, grand ceremonies were held in which the ruler touched hundreds of people afflicted with scrofula, or the “King’s Evil.” These people then received special gold coins called “touch pieces” that they regarded as amulets. By the 1400s, there was also the custom of healing through touching a coin called an angel, which in turn had been touched by the monarch.



Figure 3 Edward the Confessor as shown on the Bayeux Tapestry

Salt of the Earth

People who are described as 'the salt of the earth' are those who are considered to be of great worth and reliability. The phrase 'the salt of the earth' derives from the Bible, *Matthew 5:13* (King James Version): *Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.* The positivity towards salt in this phrase conflicts with many other uses of the word salt, which has also been used express negative concepts; for example, in the Middle Ages, salt was spread on land to poison it, as a punishment to landowners who had transgressed against society in some way. It seems that the 'excellent' meaning in 'the salt of the earth' was coined in reference to the value of salt. This is reflected in other old phrases too, for example, the aristocratic and powerful of the earth were 'above the salt' and valued workers were 'worth their salt'. 'The salt of the earth' was first published in English in Chaucer's *Summoner's Tale*, circa 1386, although Chaucer undoubtedly took his lead from Latin versions of the Bible.



Figure 4 Detail of the Last Supper which shows Judas spilling the salt

Spilling Salt was a Bad Omen

In the Middle Ages, salt was a precious resource. It was very expensive and it was believed to have medicinal properties. If salt was ever spilled, it was no longer able to be used for medicine and therefore it was gathered up and thrown over the left shoulder in order to blind the evil spirits that were said to constantly follow people around.

There is an even older reasoning behind the spilled salt superstition. In the da Vinci painting of the Last Supper, Judas Iscariot is portrayed as having knocked over the salt. This led many to see the spilling of salt as a bad omen and something that was likely to cause bad luck. Salt was known to make soil barren for a long length of time, and this is the basis for the belief that spilling salt is akin to cursing the land.

The Romans had their own beliefs about salt. They believed that it was a symbol of friendship because of its lasting quality. However, it was very expensive and useful for preserving food, so if someone spilled salt on the table it was considered to be very ominous. In contrast, it was considered propitious to spill wine on the table.

Over the centuries there have been numerous accounts and writings from historians that relate the bad omens associated with spilling salt. In addition, since the Roman Catholic Church used salt to make Holy Water, it also had religious significance which made spilling it a bad omen.

Changelings in Folklore

In Germany, the changeling is known as *Wechselbalg*, *Wechselkind*, *Kielkropf* or *Dickkopf*. Irish legends regarding changelings typically follow the same formula: a tailor is the one who first notices a changeling, the inclusion of a fairy playing bagpipes or some other instrument, and the kidnapping of a human child through a window. In the Anglo-Scottish border region it was believed that elves (or fairies) lived in "elf hills" (or "fairy hills"). Along with this belief in supernatural beings was the view that they could spirit away children, and even adults, and take them back to their own world. Often, it was thought, a baby would be snatched and replaced with a simulation of the baby, usually a male adult elf, to be suckled by the mother. The real baby would be treated well by the elves and would grow up to be one of them, whereas the changeling baby would be discontented and wearisome. The Mamuna or Boginki is a Slavic spirit that exchanges babies (making them into *odmieńce*) in the cradle. In Nordic traditional belief, it was generally believed that it was trolls or beings from the underground that changed children.

Changelings

One prevalent superstition in medieval Britain was the fear that a child could be taken and replaced with a changeling. Today this is believed to have arisen out of a need to explain child illnesses that came on suddenly, or children that were born with deformities. One of the stories of the changeling comes from the tale of a blacksmith who noticed one day that his son suddenly became lethargic and was wasting away.

The blacksmith was told that his son was taken and replaced with a changeling. To prove it he was told to put water into empty egg shells and place them around the fire. The child then sat up and spoke in the voice of the changeling stating he had had lived for centuries and had never seen something like that. The blacksmith then threw the changeling into the fire. The man journeyed into the land of the fairies with his bible and the fairies, unable to harm him due to the Bible, returned his son.

There were a number of strange tests that people performed to try and see if their child was a changeling. They typically involved doing something so strange that it would draw the changeling out in surprise. One test was to place a shoe in a bowl of soup, if the baby laughed it was a changeling. Also making bread inside of egg shells was said to be so amusing to changelings that it would cause them to expose themselves. Even as late as the 19th century, the belief in changelings prevailed.

Some scholars have suggested that changelings may have been used as a way to explain autistic children, especially since the changes can come on quickly. When a child's behavior and verbal skills rapidly declined or changed, it was blamed upon the doings of the changeling.



Figure 5 *The Devil steals a baby and leaves a changeling.*
Martino di Bartolomeo (early 15th century)

The Sea in the Sky

For this story, we are indebted to English chronicler Gervase of Tilbury and his work *Otia Imperialia*. Writing around 1212 for his patron, the Holy Roman Emperor Otto IV, he declared his belief that "the sea is higher than the land," that it was "above our habitation . . . either in or on the air." This notion was based on Genesis 1, which speaks of "waters above the firmament."

For proof, Gervase offers an episode that took place in an English village. One overcast Sunday, as the villagers were leaving church, they noticed an anchor hooked to one of the tombstones. It was attached to a rope that was stretched taut upwards to the cloudy skies. To their astonishment, the rope began to move as if someone was attempting to pry the anchor away from the tombstone. The anchor would not budge, and presently, noises like sailors shouting were heard above, and a man began to descend down the rope. The villagers took hold of him, at which point he died, “suffocated by the humidity of our dense air as if he were drowning at sea.” After an hour, the rope was cut from above, and the other sailors sailed away.

Another tale concerns a merchant who accidentally dropped his knife while out at sea. At the same hour, the very same knife suddenly fell through an open window of his house in Bristol, dropping onto the table in front of his startled wife.

Omens of Charlemagne’s Death

The Frankish king Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in A.D. 800. In the last three years of his life, according to his biographer, Einhard, the Emperor was bedeviled by sinister signs and omens. Einhard reports of frequent eclipses of the Sun and Moon, and a black spot on the Sun which lasted seven days. There were also frequent trembling at the palace at Aix-la-



Figure 6 Charlemagne and his basilica

Chapelle, and on Ascension Day, the gallery that connected the palace to the basilica—which Charlemagne built—suddenly collapsed. Another one of Charlemagne’s projects, a wooden bridge over the Rhine at Mainz that took 10 years to build, was accidentally set on fire and was totally consumed in just three hours.

During his last Saxon campaign against the Danes, Charlemagne himself saw a ball of fire appear and rush across the sky as he was leaving camp at sunrise. His horse suddenly took a forward plunge, throwing the Emperor violently to the ground. In whatever building he took shelter, strange crackling sounds from the roof were heard. At the basilica at Aix-la-Chapelle, a gilded ball adorning the pinnacle was struck by lightning, causing it to fall and shatter on the bishop’s house next door.

All these happenings left Charles unfazed and skeptical. Nevertheless, a few months before his death, people began to notice that the word “Princeps” on the legend inscribed around the basilica’s cornice (identifying “Karolus Princeps” as its builder) had faded and disappeared. Charlemagne died on January 28, 814, and was buried in his basilica.

Magonia

Sightings of mysterious objects in the sky are certainly not confined to our age. Around A.D. 820, Archbishop Agobard of Lyon, France, described beings who “fell to Earth” in his book *De Grandine et Tonitruis* (*About Hail and Thunder*), a work that seeks to debunk popular superstitions about weather phenomena. He tells us that people in his time believed in a certain region called Magonia, “from which ships come in the clouds” to steal crops.



Figure 7 Illustration of Magonia

They could apparently strike deals with the “storm-makers,” and the grain and other crops that fell in these storms were gathered by the “aerial sailors” and taken back to Magonia. Agobard was skeptical, calling such beliefs “foolishness” and the people who subscribed to them “crazy.” Nevertheless, a mob of locals claimed to have captured four beings—three men and a woman—who had apparently fallen from one of the ships. They kept the captives in chains for some days. The angry mob was itching for a lynching, and they brought the prisoners to Agobard, who, being more given to reason, pronounced them innocent and let them go.

MEGANWETAR is the mythical capital of Magonia. Inhabitants are called Magonians. Magonians can bend and change the elements of nature using songs that are impossible for humans to sing. They do this with the help of canwr and singing partners (other Magonians).

The Wild Man of Orford

Ralph of Coggeshall, abbot of an abbey in Essex, tells us the story of some fishermen from Suffolk who, one day in 1161, caught a naked wild man in their nets near the village of Orford. The “merman,” as they called it, had a long, shaggy beard and a very hairy chest, though his head was almost bald. The creature was hauled off to Orford Castle, where Bartholomew de Glanville was governor. The man was thrown into the dungeon and tortured to make him speak. With no information forthcoming, the locals could not decide if he was a fish or a man, so comfortable and at home was he at sea. They thought that he might be an evil spirit in the body of a drowned sailor.

The “merman” displayed no belief in God nor knowledge of Christian rituals. He ate whatever was given him, but he would squeeze the juice out of raw fish first before eating it. After a while, his captors decided to let him out to sea for exercise,



Figure 8 Depiction of the Wild Man of Orford

but not before fencing him in with nets. Despite their precautions, the merman managed to break through the nets and escape, amazing the onlookers with his agility in the water. The creature did return to his captors, but escaped again after two months, never to be seen again.



Figure 9 Norse depiction of a Wild Hunt

The Spectral Wild Hunt

Throughout medieval Britain and areas of the Continent, people lived in terror of packs of spectral hounds that swept through the forests in midwinter—the time when the worlds of the living and the dead collide. The hounds would be accompanied by phantom huntsmen and warriors, led by a figure who, in Germanic lands, was identified as Odin, the god of the dead. They were considered portents of death and disaster, and people would fling themselves downward to avoid seeing them. Anyone unfortunate enough to behold the ghostly spectacle might be carried away by it and dropped off miles from where he was taken.

At times, the Hunt would break into houses, stealing food and drink. While ordinary folk were terrorized, some who practiced magic would have their souls join in the Hunt while their physical bodies slept. Just hearing the hounds passing overhead amid the darkness and the howl of winter winds was enough to drive someone crazy. Their coming was often accompanied by the sounds of rattling chains and clanging bells.



Dragney Island

is in the Skagafjörður fjord in northern Iceland. The island was first mentioned in the Icelandic classic *Grettis saga* as being the refuge of the outlaw Grettir, who spent his last years there with his brother Illugi and his slave Glaumur. He fled there with his two companions when enemies were seeking his life because of its high, impervious cliffs. An old legend says that two night-prowling giants, a man and a woman, were traversing the fjord with their cow when they were surprised by the bright rays of daybreak. As a result of exposure to daylight, all three were turned into stone. Drangey represents the cow and Kerling (supposedly the female giant, the name means "Old Hag") is to the south of it. Karl (the male giant) was to the north of the island, but he disappeared long ago.

A description of the Hunt is preserved in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (1127): ". . . it was seen and heard by many men: many hunters riding. The hunters were black, and great and loathy, and their hounds all black, and wide-eyed and loathy, and they rode on black horses and black he-goats. This was seen in the very deer park in the town of Peterborough, and in all the woods from the same town to Stamford; and the monks heard the horn blowing that they blew that night. Truthful men who kept watch at night said that it seemed to them that there might be about twenty or thirty horn blowers. This was seen and heard . . . all through Lenten tide until Easter."

In Germany, it was believed that the Hunt included the souls of unbaptized babies, while in France it was said to be led by King Herod pursuing the Holy Innocents.

A Place for Evil to Live

Drangey Island, in the North Atlantic, about an hour's boat ride from northern Iceland, is marked by a sheer cliff face rising 168 meters (551 ft) above sea level. This towering outcrop looming out of the ocean is home to thousands of seabirds. In the Middle Ages, this forbidding, fortress-like island was believed to be home to evil beings and trolls. Men who climbed the cliffs to hunt for birds and their eggs often fell to their deaths, their ropes mysteriously cut.

Terrified, people no longer ventured to the cliffs of Drangey, which became a problem for Gudmundur (or Gvendur), the saintly bishop of Holar. The northern Icelandic town had attracted numerous beggars, and feeding them depended on hunting at Drangey. So Gudmundur decided to exorcise the island. With several priests and a barrel of holy water, the bishop began blessing the island, using ropes to negotiate the treacherous cliffs. He was almost finished with his rituals when a gigantic, hairy hand came out of the cliff face and began to cut Gudmundur's rope. Fortunately, the rope had been blessed beforehand and held. When the creature saw that it couldn't kill the bishop, it begged, "Stop your blessing, bishop Gvendur, even the evil needs a place to live."

The bishop therefore declared that that part of the cliff should be a place for the evil to dwell, and that people should avoid hunting there. It is said that this spot attracts so many birds since it is the only place on the island where people are off-limits. Bishop Gudmundur began to perform regular blessings of other evil places, but he always took care to leave aside "a place for evil to live."

The Pest Maiden

The Black Death was one of the most devastating plagues to visit humanity. The "Great Mortality" mowed down an entire third of Europe's population in the 14th century. Part of the terror was that no one really understood what was causing millions to fall dead, and therefore how to avoid being infected. The best explanation put forward by the learned academics of the University of Paris was that the pestilence was caused by a combination of earthquakes and an ill-fated conjunction of the planets. The malignant alignment not only caused the pestilence, but also raised up the storms that spread the noxious fumes from the Earth, which had been released by the quakes.

But ordinary, common folk could not comprehend such sophisticated ideas. They would rather believe that the plague was a punishment from God, and was a portent of the end of the world. Plague legends tried to explain how the disease spread—the best known one is the Austrian legend of the Pest Jungfrau, or the Pest Maiden. She was imagined as a being



Figure 10 Representation of the plague

enveloped in a blue flame who flew across the land, spreading the contagion. In Scandinavia, she was believed to emerge from the mouth of a dead victim—also as a blue flame—and fly away to infect the next house. In Lithuania, the Maiden would wave a red scarf through the door or window to let in the plague. One story tells of a heroic man who deliberately waited for the Maiden at his open window with a drawn sword. The Maiden did come, and as soon as she extended her hand to wave her deadly scarf, the man struck and cut off the limb. The brave man died as a result of his deed, but his village was spared, and the scarf was preserved as a relic in the local church.

Personifying the plague was surprisingly common in legend. In post-medieval Sweden and Norway, the disease was portrayed as a traveling pair—an old man and an old woman carrying a shovel and a broom, respectively. The old man with the shovel would come and spare some people, but when the old woman went forth with her broom, “not even a mother’s child was left alive.”

The Malleus Maleficarum

The *Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Hammer of Witches*) was written by two German friars, Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, to debunk arguments that witchcraft does not exist. It was also meant to serve as a manual for the detection, prosecution, and punishment of witches. It was responsible for the ensuing frenzy of witch hunts which covered Europe with the blood of thousands of victims, mostly women.

The *Malleus* is evidence that some superstitions are far from harmless. The book decrees that witchcraft is heresy, and that not believing in it is also heresy. It asserts that witches are mostly women, and it is female lust that leads women to form pacts with the Devil and copulate with incubi. Midwives are especially singled out for their alleged ability to prevent conception and terminate pregnancies. It accuses them of

eating infants and offering live children to the Devil. But the real heinousness of the *Malleus* and its authors lies in the procedures drawn up to identify and exterminate witches.

The accused are to be stripped and searched for the “devil’s marks,” then dunked in water or burned, since people who are under the Devil’s protection cannot be drowned or killed by fire. Using the *Malleus* as a guide, torture was liberally used to extract confessions or implicate other people throughout the witch hysteria. Gruesome torture devices were developed that could crush or dislocate bones (the Bootkens, strappado), mangle bodily orifices (the Pear), or tear out fingernails (the Turcas). Red-hot pincers were also applied to tear out pieces of flesh. Those found guilty of witchcraft were usually burned at the stake.

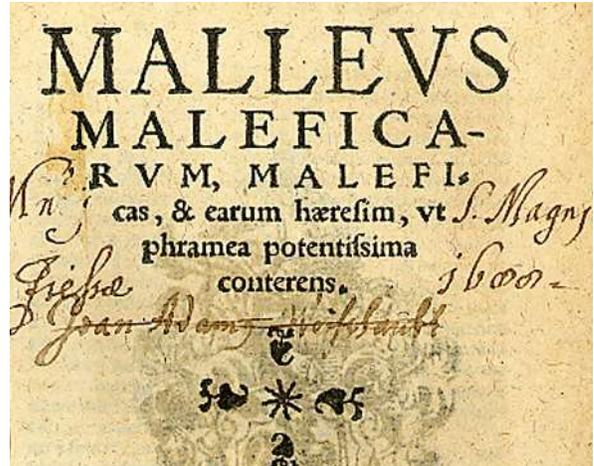


Figure 11 Cover of 1520 edition of the *Malleus Maleficarum*



Order of the Garter

The Order of the Garter traces its history to the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In the poem, Gawain accepts a girdle (very similar in function and connotation to a garter) from the wife of his host (while resisting her carnal temptations) to save his life and then wears it as a mark of shame for his moral failure and cowardice. King Arthur and his men proclaim it no shame and begin, themselves, to wear the girdle to indicate their shared fate. At that point, however, the garter was a larger garment that was used as a foundation.

The Bride’s Garter

Bridal garments were considered blessed. The bride would have all her clothes ripped from her by the guests on the wedding night as everyone tried to snatch a piece. Gradually attention focused on the bride’s garter-ribbon – a symbol of sexuality and fertility.

In medieval times, unmarried men fought for the bride’s garter to ensure they would be the next to find a beautiful and fertile wife. Bachelors even mobbed the bride as she stood at the altar, throwing her to the ground and ripping the garters from her during the wedding ceremony. When the church protested, the custom evolved to the groom removing the lucky garter from his new wife in the bridal chamber and tossing them down to the waiting men.

Evil Spirits Lurk in Brussels Sprouts

People claim that cutting a cross in the bottom help the Brussels sprouts cook better, but you don’t find them served like that in most restaurants. The superstition dates back to the medieval times, when it was believed that evil spirits or tiny demons hid between the leaves of lettuces, sprouts and cabbage. These spirits could enter anyone who swallowed them, making the person ill or at the very least giving them stomach ache. So before cooking, a cross was cut in every sprout or cabbage to drive the evil spirits out from the leaves.

Knock on Wood

Also called **touch wood**, is an apotropaic tradition of literally touching, tapping, or knocking on wood, or merely stating that one is doing or intending to do so, in order to avoid "tempting fate" after making a favorable prediction or boast, or a declaration concerning one's own death or another unfavorable situation. In some versions of the tradition, only one person, the speaker, is meant to "knock on wood". The origin of the custom may be in Celtic or German folklore, wherein supernatural beings are thought to live in trees, and can be invoked for protection. One explanation states that the tradition derived from the Pagans who thought that trees were the homes of fairies, spirits, dryads and many other mystical creatures. In these instances, people might knock on or touch wood to request good luck, or to distract spirits with evil intentions. When in need of a favor or some good luck, one politely mentioned this wish to a tree and then touched the bark, representing the first "knock". The second "knock" was to say "thank you". The knocking was also supposed to prevent evil spirits from hearing your speech and as such stop them from interfering. Alternatively, some traditions have it that by knocking upon wood, you would awaken and release the benevolent wood fairies that dwelt there. Another explanation links the practice to wooden crucifixes. In medieval England knights being sent into battle would visit the wooden effigy of a knight in Southwark Cathedral and touch its nose for luck. The Knight's Tale in *The Canterbury Tales* begins in Southwark for this reason. The effigy can still be seen in the cathedral to this day.



Figure 12 Wooden effigy of a knight in Southwark Cathedral

The Evil Eye

The evil eye is a curse or legend believed to be cast by a malevolent glare, usually given to a person when they are unaware. Many cultures believe that receiving the evil eye will cause misfortune or injury, while others believe it to be a kind of supernatural force that casts or reflects a malevolent gaze back-upon those who wish harm upon others (especially innocents). Talismans or amulets created to protect against the evil eye are also frequently called "evil eyes".

Belief in the evil eye dates back to Greek Classical antiquity. It is referenced by Hesiod, Callimachus, Plato, Diodorus Siculus, Theocritus, Plutarch, Heliodorus, Pliny the Elder, and Aulus Gellius.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims in medieval times professed distinct theologies but amazingly similar popular beliefs about the need for a defense against a shared threat. This fear persists to the present day.

Charms and decorations with eye-like symbols known as nazars, which are used to repel the evil eye, are a common sight across the world. Other popular amulets and talismans used to ward off the evil eye include the hamsa, while Italy employs a variety of other unique charms and gestures to defend against the evil eye, including the cornicello, the cimaruta, and the sign of the horns.

Holed Stones

Historically, stones with natural holes were thought to have powerful protective properties; sometimes called holy stones or hag stones. Keys were attached to holed-stones to guard the locks they fitted against robbers trying to break in, and to prevent evil spirits entering through the keyhole. The combination of iron and stone was thought to protect against all kinds of ill luck. Holed-pebbles were also hung near the doors of houses and animal-byres to protect the entrances from witches and demons.

The Aghade Holed Stone or Cloghaphoill is a large holed stone and Irish National Monument located in Aghade, County Carlow, Ireland. Archaeologists believe that the stone was originally a door to a megalithic tomb. The hole may have permitted the offering of food or other objects to the dead. Up to the 18th century it was common for sick children to be passed through the hole, in the belief that this would cure them.

The triangular Tolvan holed stone is an unusually shaped, roughly triangular, megalith in Cornwall, England, behind the farmhouse at Tolvan Cross. The stone is reputed to possess healing powers. In particular, according to the legend, it guarantees fertility to the newly married - but only if the partners squeeze naked through the hole.



Figure 13 Tolvan holed stone.

The Mên-an-Tol, in Cornwall, UK, is supposed to have a fairy or piskie guardian who can make miraculous cures. In one story, a changeling baby was put through the stone in order for the mother to get the real child back. Evil piskies had changed her child, and the ancient stones were able to reverse their evil spell. Local legend claims that if at full moon a woman passes through the holed stone seven times backwards, she will soon become pregnant. Another legend is that passage through the stone will cure a child of rickets. For centuries, children with rickets were passed naked through the hole in the middle stone nine times.

Cutting the Wedding Cake

In Roman times, the wedding cake was made from wheat, fruit, nuts and honey – symbols of wealth and fertility. The cake was broken over the bride’s head to ensure a fertile and prosperous marriage, and the guests scrambled to pick up the crumbs of good luck, which is why even today small pieces of wedding cake are sent to guests who can’t attend.



Figure 14 Medieval wedding cake

BRIDE may come from the Old English *brȳd*, which in turn is derived from the Proto-Germanic verb root *brū-*, meaning 'to cook, brew, or make a broth,' which was the role of the daughter-in-law in primitive families.

GROOM is short for bridegroom. The first mention of the term *bridegroom* dates to 1604, from the Old English *brȳdguma* a compound of *brȳd* (bride) and *guma* (man, human being, hero).

The Romans brought their bread-breaking wedding tradition with them when they conquered Britain in 43 CE. The Brits took the tradition one step further, throwing the bread at the bride to show her fertility.

By the medieval days, the English started stacking spiced buns, scones, and cookies as high as possible—a precursor to the tiered cakes of today—and the bride and groom would try to kiss over it. Legend said if they smooched successfully without letting the whole thing topple over, they’d have good fortune.

By Tudor times, the stack had transformed into a single tiered cake that the bride cut, usually with the groom’s hand over hers, in the belief that if the bride didn’t cut the first slice, the marriage would be childless.

Walking under a Ladder is Bad Luck

A leaning ladder, wall and ground form a triangle which is a symbol of the Holy Trinity. It was considered a sin and bad luck to break the holy triangle by walking through it.

Crossed Fingers

To cross one's fingers is a hand gesture commonly used to wish for luck. Occasionally it is interpreted as an attempt to implore God for protection. The gesture is referred to by the common expressions "cross your fingers", "keep your fingers crossed", or just "fingers crossed". The act of crossing one's fingers mainly belongs to Christianity. The earliest use of the gesture had two people crossing their index fingers to form a cross.

Common usage of the gesture traces back to the early centuries of the Catholic Church. Common use of crossed finger is found in the Christians who would cross their fingers to invoke the power associated with Christ's cross for protection, when faced with evil. In 16th-century England, people continued to cross fingers or make the sign of the cross to ward off evil, as well as when people coughed or sneezed.

This superstition thus became popular among many early European Christian cultures. In some places, a comrade or well-wisher placed their index finger over the index finger of the person making the wish, the two fingers forming a cross. The one person makes the wish, the other empathizes and supports. Over centuries, the custom was simplified, so that a person could wish on their own, by crossing their index and middle fingers to form an X. But traces remain—two people hooking index fingers as a sign of greeting or agreement is still common in some circles today.

Black Cats

Cats filled one very important role for humans in the Middle Ages – they caught mice, which would have otherwise been a serious nuisance for people and their food. However, medieval writers even saw this activity in negative tones, often comparing the way cats caught mice with how the devil could catch souls. William Caxton wrote *“the devyl playeth ofte with the synnar, lyke as the catte doth with the mous.”*

By the twelfth-century this association with the devil became even more ingrained. Around 1180, Walter Map explained in one of his works that during satanic rituals *“the Devil descends as a black cat before his devotees. The worshippers put out the light and draw near to the place where they saw their master. They feel after him and when they have found him they kiss him under the tail.”*

Medieval Pet Names

In medieval England domestic cats were known as Gyb – the short form of Gilbert – and that name was also popular for individual pet cats.

Meanwhile in France they were called Tibers or Tibert was generic name of domestic cat in France. In England we find dogs that were named Sturdy, Whitefoot, Hardy, Jakke, Bo and Terri. Anne Boleyn, one of the wives of King Henry VIII, had a dog named Purkoy, who got its name from the French 'pourquoi' because it was very inquisitive. Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Nun's Priest Tale* has a line where they name three dogs: Colle, Talbot and Gerland. Meanwhile, in the early fifteenth-century, Edward, Duke of York, wrote *The Master of Game*, which explains how dogs are to be used in hunting and taken care of. He also included a list of 1100 names that he thought would be appropriate for hunting dogs. They include Troy, Nosewise, Amiable, Nameles, Clenche, Bragge, Ringwood and Holdfast. The 14th century French knight Jehan de Seure had a hound named Parceval, while his wife had Dyamant.

Heretical religious groups, such as the Cathars and Waldensians, were accused by Catholic churchmen of associating and even worshipping cats. When the Templars were put on trial in the early fourteenth-century, one of the accusations against them was allowing cats to be part of the services and even praying to the cats. Witches too, were said to be able to shape-shift into cats, which led to Pope Innocent VIII declaring in 1484 that *"the cat was the devil's favourite animal and idol of all witches."*



Figure 15 Medieval depiction of a black cat

Medieval people generally believed that animals were created by God to serve and be ruled by humans, but the cat, even when domesticated, cannot be trained to be loyal and obedient like a dog. Edward, Duke of York, writing in the early fifteenth-century, summed up what many medieval people must have thought: *"their falseness and malice are well known. But one thing I dare well say that if any beast has the devil's spirit in him without doubt it is the cat, both the wild and the tame."*

ST. MARY THE VIRGIN

Superstitions from the Middle Ages
