

ignorant peasants and ambitious witch hunters. Even some followers of Taal who live especially wild, isolated lives beyond the bounds of society may be misconstrued as witches. Ironically, although most witch hunters are well-read on the cults and strictures of Chaos, Khaine and other unacceptable gods, the cults of Taal and the Old Faith are only vaguely understood by non-initiates.

## Evil Witches



Genuinely evil witches, who use necromancy, daemonology and other black arts, are relatively rare; but there are secret covens of witches in many parts of Bretonnia, both amongst the benighted peasants in the deepest countryside and amidst the aristocrats and bourgeoisie

of the towns. These covens actively worship the gods of Chaos, and in some cases have existed for centuries - possibly more; like the rural adherents of Taal and the Old Faith, for them the worship of Chaos or Khaine is simply a part of village life as it always has been. In fact, these peasants probably don't see worshipping these gods as wrong, or perhaps not even bad; it is simply the way things are done in their village and they don't know any better. However, there are a few - mainly in towns - who turn to the Chaos gods in full knowledge of what they are doing, and revel in the diabolical powers that are granted to them. These are undeniably the most dangerous of all, and include not only peasants and urban lower classes but nobles, academics and even corrupt clerics. In the cities of the coast, the cult of Khaine is especially popular; there are several riotous cults of young nobles and wealthy merchants who indulge in ritual slaughter and blood drinking. It is believed that a small number of Dark Elves head up these groups and try to co-ordinate activities all along the coast.

Further inland, there are many covens and cults dedicated to Ecate, the goddess of witchcraft and both wife and mother to Khaine. In fact, there are probably as many groups dedicated to Ecate as there are to the other chaos powers. Her worship, it is speculated, may have been passed on by some of the last Elves in the Old World who fled from the burning coastal cities to hide their dark beliefs in the forest. In time these were passed on to the incoming human tribes, who have kept them alive ever since. In fact, the talent for magic and witchcraft that is displayed in some areas may be a result of lingering Elven blood in the local population. Covens of Ecate tend to be amongst the most cruel and savage of all, taking delight in slaughtering innocents, corrupting the weak and causing general mayhem. Wild midnight sabbats are most common amongst covens and cults of Ecate, which are almost exclusively composed of women in Bretonnia. Whilst chaos covens tend to use secrecy and cunning to preserve and increase their power, Ecate's followers are far less subtle; fear and cruelty are their greatest weapons against retribution. Rivalry and even outright feuding

between covens dedicated to different deities is not unknown; even groups knowingly or unknowingly working for the same power find themselves in conflict from time to time.

All of these witches make use of necromancy and daemonology, and engage in human sacrifice, deviant sexual revelry and many other unwholesome customs; it is a rare few confessions extracted from members of such cults that has created the popular image of witches. Desperate and dangerous, real witches are only caught very rarely, for they nearly always keep their illicit practices well hidden, and can call on mighty magic to protect themselves should the worst happen. More than one witch-hunter has met his end going up against what he thought to be a batty, cackling old crone with an amusing glint in her eye...

## The Gypsies

The Gypsies of Bretonnia suffer a great deal of mistrust and prejudice at the hands of the settled population. These travellers are disliked for being openly 'different' and for the separate nature of their lifestyle; it is seen as unnatural for people to travel constantly, outside the natural system of authority and society, owing loyalty to no lord or master. Gypsies are said to be totally untrustworthy and liable to steal, rape and murder at the first opportunity. They feature in stories told to frighten children, where Azbou the Gypsy with his serrated knife, hairy hands and huge lips is a popular fiend conjured up by parents and teachers.

In spite of this prejudice, the Gypsies still preserve their own ancient customs and traditions, including a distinct language. Aside from Ranald, Taal and sometimes the Old Faith, they tend to worship Ecate; a goddess with definite connections to evil, although not generally revered in that aspect by the gypsies. It is from their devotion to her that they gain their unusual talent for fortune telling and magic.

The spread of the witch-hunts has hit the Gypsy population hard. Accusations of witchcraft are used to sanction acts of violence against Gypsies whenever they settle near a Bretonnian community, excusing the riots and cries against the 'invaders'. Witch-hunters, latching onto this hatred, frequently direct their energies at Gypsies too, virtually guaranteeing a guilty sentence. It is not unknown for witch-hunters to actually follow in the wake of Gypsy bands, hounding them constantly until they pass over the borders of the Kingdom.

Whilst it seems that there is a tradition of magic-use and especially fortune telling amongst the Gypsies (which witch-hunters and fearful peasants quickly interpret as collusion with the chaos gods), few actually use evil magic. Those who do, however, tend to be if anything more dangerous than other witches, for Gypsies have a strange affinity with magic and fortune telling which is easily turned against those they deem to be enemies. They frighten other gypsies into servitude and turn the whole band into a wandering cult. Corrupt and misleading futures are read to pervert the minds of visitors, and animals and children disappear around the camp of a gypsy witch as she uses them in weird curses, vile

concoctions and dire spells. It is partly thanks to them that other gypsies have gained such a bad name.

## Beliefs about witches

'Because she looks like one!'

There is a definite witch stereotype current in Bretonnia. This does not quite reflect the reality of witch covens and genuine users of black magic (who usually strive to look as normal as possible), but does help to explain why the public targets the people they do.

To the average Bretonnian, a witch is a stooped, warty old crone, who lives alone in a ramshackle cottage.

She is prone to cackling and muttering curses, and will undoubtedly keep a cat, owl, raven or any other animal, which is without a doubt some daemonic familiar in disguise. She will also, naturally, possess a cauldron and a broomstick for brewing wicked potions and flying to debauched sabbats. No-one ever pauses to think that an old woman would be decidedly lonely, hungry and dirty if she did not live with a pet, a cauldron to cook in and a broom to do the cleaning; but that is not the point. Anyone who fulfils some or all of these criteria and is unpopular with the neighbours runs the risk of being called a witch, especially if a witch-hunter is active in the area.

Although this is the most widely held image of a witch, it is commonly believed that beautiful, virginal maidens might also be witches - they may, after all, be crones or evil spirits masked so as to weaken the resistance of red-blooded Bretonnian men. This also helps to explain the unpredictable and irrational actions of the young to their elders. Men can also be considered witches; typically, it is old men who live alone and are wont to talk to themselves that arouse the most suspicion.

'When shall we three meet again?'

It is an accepted belief that witches work in covens (cults) and gather regularly at great, hedonistic meetings called sabbats. What witches actually do at a sabbat is subject to wild and fanciful speculation: scholars who spend too much time alone in dark libraries with scented candles and fanciful, wide-eyed tavern bawds are responsible for spreading the most outlandish rumours. Devils and daemons are imagined to lead naked witches in great dances, singing lewd and blasphemous songs as weird, inhuman pipers provide an enchanted melody. Babies are sacrificed, cooked and eaten, with the odd blond virgin, black cockerel or lamb thrown in for good measure. Wild acts of sexual deviancy are committed,

often involving the most unlikely of couplings. New spells to wreak havoc on the hapless people of Bretonnia are passed round like recipes for sweet pastries. The meetings close with the witches swearing to uphold their allegiance to the chaos gods, then flying home mounted on a broomstick or an eggshell.

These sabbats are said to take place in the dead of night at isolated places touched by the power of evil spirits: bleak moors, misty pools, shady woods, craggy rocks and deserted ruins are commonly regarded as the places where witches gather. Most villages, in fact, are proud to boast a place somewhere in the



vicinity frequented by ghosts and where witches meet for sabbats; the inhabitants of neighbouring towns and villages argue over which attracts the biggest number of witches (sometimes reaching quite absurd levels; as high as 10,000 in some cases), as if they actually wanted the forces of darkness to bless their home in particular. Notably, very few villages will be able to give any proof other than old legend saying that witches ever actually meet at the site in question; nobody will actually admit to having been there recently or to having seen anything odd there, but everyone will know somebody else who has. Whether this somebody exists is another matter entirely.

In reality, the idea of covens and sabbats is founded on more than a grain of truth. Most witches do not operate alone, and meet regularly with fellow witches, from the same or nearby communities. These gatherings are not always much like the outlandish romps envisaged by fantasists; they are quiet, forbidding affairs, often with a great deal of diligent chanting, oath-swearing and magic-working needed to achieve any results. Worshippers of Ecate and Khaine, however, do resort to far more debauched and wild excesses than others. And what all witches do is far more subtle and disturbing than popular imagination could even conceive.

A witches' coven - typically numbering between two and ten individuals; any more would make discovery likely - is really little more than a chaos cult, which meets to invoke the favour of their dark master. They know that indulging in overt magic or drawing attention to their meeting would be extremely dangerous; real coven meetings more often take place in secluded, sheltered areas, and protection is nearly always used (both magical and otherwise). In fact, urban covens, where all the witches live in the same town, normally meet exactly where no-one would ever expect: under the very noses of the authorities, in an attic or a cellar or a deserted workshop.

Sabbats also take place at certain times. These occasions involve several covens coming together at the same time to engage in collective devotion to the dark gods; there are particular nights of the year, linked to the lunar cycle and beliefs about magic, which are held to be particularly auspicious for witches. Surprisingly, the public and the genuine witches generally seem to be in agreement on this fact; sabbats are said to take place mostly on le Jour des Sorcieres at New Year and on le Jour des Mysteres in the summer.

Those who meet at a sabbat represent a larger, slightly more organised cult, which usually recognises a leader of some sort. It is up to this leader to direct the others in worship and to issue general commands. Sabbats are slightly closer to the popular image than might be expected. Dancing - sometimes in the nude - and chanting are common, and sacrifices must be made; when chaos entities appear, they may well engage in sexual activities with the witches present (it is said that pretty maidens are taken from the front, whilst crones are taken from behind so as not to offend the daemons with their ugliness). However, sabbats are very rare and always extremely carefully guarded. Also, the place where they meet is nearly always changed every year, with those meant to attend only being told shortly before they must make their journey. Those few who have learnt of the genuine witches in Bretonnia speculate on the number of sabbats, and believe that there may be perhaps half a dozen; some say there may even be some sort of vague provincial organisation, based either on ancient, long-forgotten boundaries or on some insidious plan to infiltrate and bring down civilisation. It is only the witches themselves, however, who may hold the key to this debate, and the small number that do fall into the clutches of the witch-hunters are rarely forthcoming.

Not only evil, chaotic witches hold sabbats and form covens. Since women and peasants getting involved with magic in any way are looked on with extreme suspicion, it is not surprising that those who do so are forced to meet in secret. Those who have picked up knowledge of herbalism and a little magic from ancient tradition discuss their knowledge in secret. Similarly, rural worshippers of Taal, Rhya and the Old Faith, who have followed their gods with strange rites for longer than there has been a Kingdom of Bretonnia, hold secret meetings at places of especial significance for their faith, such as stone circles, blessed groves and faery pools. Their moonlit gatherings, marked by chanting in forgotten tongues, veneration of skulls and trees and dressing in masks, are easily mistaken for chaos worship by witch hunters and commoners alike. Great celebrations are held at the equinox of each season, which look worryingly like sabbats to the untrained eye. Even fully-fledged druids and clerics of Taal are sometimes burnt at the stake for witchcraft.

'For the vain price of four and twenty years...'

Contracts with the chaos gods are believed to be vital in granting witches their supernatural powers. When they first devote themselves to a life of evil and cruelty, it is claimed, witches sign pacts with their infernal masters stipulating the conditions under which they will serve. Often these are imagined written in the most outlandish of

ways: they might be written on cured human flesh, in virgin's blood, in ancient and forgotten tongues, or backwards. Finding a witch's pact with the chaos gods is rare, but if one is found then even the most hardened and merciful of observers are forced to accept the suspect's guilt. As might be expected, though, forged pacts are far from unknown, but convincing ones are very hard to fake, and are only produced in trials directed by the wealthy against particularly detested foes. Unless, that is, a real witch is involved.

Chillingly, this belief is based on fact. Most witches, who usually function as part of a chaotic cult, do indeed sign some sort of pact detailing their arrangement with the chaos gods. These are powerful documents, and it is said that destroying or ripping one causes a witch to go blind (one or two cases are on record to prove this). Consequently, they are very well hidden by their owners; many are buried or placed in equally inaccessible places such as at the bottom of wells or in tombs.

The text of an apparently genuine contract discovered during the trial of Jehenne de Brigue, verified as such by a revered cleric and no less than three wizards, is given below. The first part, written in a hand more commonly found in texts worm-eaten with age and shunned by right-thinking men, is in the Dark Tongue; the second part was apparently written by Jehenne herself, and is marked at the end with her blood and with another, unidentified substance thought to be the 'mark' of the document's other signatory.

*'I, Lord Slaanesh, have today accepted the pact of alliance with Jehenne de Brigue, who is of our kingdom. We promise her the love of men and women, mastery in the unseen arts, worldly honours, pleasures, knowledge and riches. She will fornicate every three days; intoxication will be dear to her. She will offer to us once per year a living tribute; she will trample underfoot the sacraments of the lesser deities, and she will speak unto us our prayers and render unto us our rites. By virtue of this pact, she will live blissfully for twenty years among humans, and finally will come to us her Master. I, Lord Slaanesh, Despoiler of the Pure, do sign and affirm this contract.'*

*'My Lord Slaanesh, I acknowledge thee as my prince and master, and promise to serve and obey thee as long as I shall live in this world and the next. I renounce all other deities and their saints and holy rites, and all the prayers and petitions by which the faithful might intercede for me. And I promise thee that I will do as much evil as I can, and that I will draw everyone else to evil, for the furtherance of my Lord Slaanesh and his designs. I renounce all former allegiances, swearing my body and soul unto Lord Slaanesh alone. And if I fail to serve and adore thee, and if I do not pay thee homage thrice every day, I give you my life as thine own. Made this year and day by me, Jehenne de Brigue.'*

## Maleficia

'Maleficium' is the name applied to the evil magical acts perpetrated by witches. Aside from the summoning and binding of daemons, most Maleficia cited on the part of witches are more peasant in character. Typical examples include making milk go sour, damaging crops, causing poor weather, inflicting minor curses such as warts and killing animals. Witches are also accused of creating potions from herbs and other substances, which can be used to further the witch's ends or to be given to favoured disciples; love potions used to seduce recalcitrant men are the most common brew witches are accused of producing. Many of the witnesses called during witch trials will give apparent 'evidence' of Maleficia ('My whole herd stopped giving milk after *she* looked at them! Well, three of 'em at least').

True witches do make frequent use of evil magic, but are far more insidious and imaginative than the witches of popular legend. They do not focus on crops and cows, and if they do so the effects are far more subtle and long-term. Rather, they use their spells and daemoniac blessings to further the interests of the chaotic gods, sowing the seeds of fear and dissent amongst others. Some do not even go this far, and use magic only for self-defence and personal gratification. As for the potions and lotions, a great many elderly women in rural communities do know how to use herbs and traditional remedies to prepare medicines and perhaps one or two so-called potions. The vast majority of these, however, do not use any magic; on the contrary, they are often highly valued, being just as effective as the remedies purveyed by apothecaries and physicians at exorbitant prices. However, the brewing of any potion or herbal remedy can be seized upon by anybody as evidence of witchcraft.

## Adventure ideas



### CAMPAIGN IDEA: La Chambre Ardente

It all began as an apparently rather innocuous investigation ordered quietly by King Charles III de la Tete d'Or. Rumours had been picked up by his agents that

an international ring was supplying aristocrats at the Oisillon Palace with poisons and potions, which it was thought were being used to kill off unwanted husbands, wives and political enemies. Initial inquiries led to a certain Marie Bosse in a large Guisoreux town house, who worked as fortune-teller and seer for the great and the good; many of her clients were nobles up from the Palace. She was caught in a covert operation, tricked by a planted 'client' into revealing the real nature of her services: poisons of many deadly types were offered, the ingredients of some of which were enough to condemn Bosse as a witch. She was arrested, together with a beautiful high-class courtesan lodging with her known simply as 'La Dame Vigoreuse' (she never revealed her real name; many claimed she was the illegitimate daughter of an aristocrat, escaped from a nunnery, but did not know the identity of her parents).

Whilst the King's investigators could already be proud of themselves, it was at this point that the famously merciless witch-hunter Nicholas de la Reynie got involved. He had been conducting research of his own that linked Bosse and La Dame Vigoreuse to far more than the sale of a few poisons, reading Tarot cards and the seduction of aristocrats. He found, on further investigation, a secret shrine hidden in abandoned cellars beneath Bosse's town house, devoted to Slaanesh, the god of depraved pleasure. Most worrying of all, many of her noble clients had partaken in lewd rituals there according to Bosse's own testimony and certain papers found at her house and elsewhere. Incriminating 'objects' - including whips, knives, bloodied clothes and damning documents - were found in the blasphemous shrine and swiftly spirited away to the securest dungeons in Guisoreux.

Fearing a scandal, the King took Reynie into his confidence and (fortunately in one of his more rational moods at the time) had a private interview with the witch-hunter. A crisis of dangerous proportions threatened to rack the heart of Bretonnia; transcripts of confessions from Marie Bosse and La Dame Vigoreuse, extracted without torture, implicated several *hundred* aristocrats in the poisoner-cultist circle with which Bosse was involved, amongst them some of the most illustrious names in the land. The only name ever given to this great cult was 'L'Ecole de la Nuit'; the School of Night.

Reynie was placed in charge of an exceptional institution: 'La Chambre Ardente', the Burning Room, named as such for the hundreds of candles used to light it. The witch-hunter himself was one of the leading members of the body which sat in judgement of those brought to the Chambre Ardente, and alongside him were some of the most noted scholars, wizards, witch-hunters and lawyers in the land, assembled by the King to cleanse his court of witchcraft and destroy the School of Night. The Chambre's existence was top secret, and its orders were carried out by the King's Musketeers, who were under unprecedented orders simply to obey and ask no questions. Clearly the task facing the Chambre Ardente, even with the unlimited support granted by a terrified King, was enormous; nearly all of those named by Bosse and La Dame Vigoreuse were indeed involved with witchcraft to some degree, knowingly or unknowingly. What was to be done to those accused was a delicate question: to have tortured everyone implicated would

have soon brought the affair into the open, whilst to have executed even half of those named would have constituted an unacceptable holocaust which could never be explained to the shocked survivors, even less to a raging populace. The affair of the *Chambre Ardente* was indeed one of the gravest threats to strike the Bretonnian court, though the only alternative - the *School of Night* - could have been incalculably worse.

How the *Chambre Ardente* and the *School of Night* are slotted into the game is up to you. It would be quite possible to have the players as the initial investigators employed by the King to track down Marie Bosse via one or two vague hints left by a few murdered aristocrats. They could then move on, either working with, against or replacing Nicholas de la Reynie in revealing the shrine in Bosse's house and tracking down a few other initial suspects. After this, the players could become part of the *Chambre Ardente* themselves, uncovering, questioning and possibly bringing to justice some of the most important individuals named. The challenge of keeping all of this invisible to the rest of the nobles at the Oisillon Palace and to the public should make everything even more tricky. How the whole *Chambre Ardente* affair winds up is left open: perhaps the conspiracy is simply too large, and the King reluctantly dissolves the *Chambre*, 'liquidating' anyone with knowledge of it? Would the individuals involved with the *Chambre* decide to turn a blind eye to the rot that permeates the court, or else would they pursue a clandestine campaign against the corrupt nobles? Maybe the *Chambre* could become tyrannical, or even infiltrated by those it wishes to prosecute? What are the credentials of Nicholas de la Reynie and the other members; can they be entirely trusted? Could the *Chambre* could even discover who is the devious master of the *School of Night* (undoubtedly a major personality at court), capture them and put an end to the whole sordid business? Whichever eventuality you choose to go with, the *Chambre Ardente* could easily be worked into a very substantial campaign.

### 'Get thee to a nunnery!'

The many nunneries across Bretonnia have acquired a reputation for corruption and licentiousness. Perhaps this is because so many who retreat to the cloister do so merely because they are the unwanted daughters of noble families, superfluous and unnecessary after their father decides no more dowries can be paid and elder daughters have forged enough alliances. Others are 'fallen women', young aristocrats who have become pregnant after an ill-advised flirtation; or the illegitimate daughters of wealthy and prominent men. Whatever their origins, the nuns of Bretonnia are often simply shut off from the world and men just as they reach sexual maturity. Many are forced by boredom and frustration to turn to forbidden activities in the dark and silent corridors of Bretonnia's nunneries, merely in the hope of escape, diversion or attracting men to their plight. Possession, sexual license and worship of evil gods are frequently alleged, and witch-hunters are becoming ever more frequent visitors to Bretonnia's nunneries.

La Barroche is a large nunnery dedicated to Shallya and Sainte Isabelle the Chaste located more or less

midway between Oiseau and Guisoreux in a secluded area of down-to-earth farmers. It is home to many young women condemned for the reasons given above. A shaded carriage arrives nearly every week to deliver a new member to the congregation, which is ruled over by the formidable Sister Udinot. Until recently, La Barroche was a discreet semi-secret amongst the nobles at the Oisillon Palace and in Guisoreux, but a few shocking discoveries have drawn undesired attention to Sister Udinot's community.

At first it was just a cruelly slaughtered lamb, but shortly after rumours spread of children going missing from the nearby villages. In desperation, the local peasants assembled outside the nunnery crying for an explanation. Sister Udinot told them firmly that she would take steps to find out who was responsible, and affirmed that the sisters of La Barroche had nothing to do with it. Although Sister Udinot did organise a search (she is either deceived or blinkered to the events at La Barroche), nothing was ever found. Only three days later another incident brought damning evidence against La Barroche: one sister, identified as Macette Ruilly (illegitimate daughter of the Baron de l'Equenne), was found dead, her throat cut, lying naked in a grove close to the nunnery, surrounded by crude but unnerving symbols daubed onto the trees. Immediately cries of witchcraft were raised, and it is at this point that the players become involved.

Sister Udinot wants them to come and go as soon as possible and with as little fuss as possible; she is keen to maintain the reputation of La Barroche and does not want to jeopardise the hefty 'donations' received when new nuns are sent. Within the nunnery, there are in fact two groups of nuns devoted to dark arts: one is a cult dedicated to the worship of Ecate (of which Sister Ruilly was a member); the other is a smaller group devoted to Tzeentch, the Lord of Change. The latter coven was responsible for slaying Ruilly, for they had discovered that their rivals were attempting to invoke a ritual granting them immense power (which they feared would be used against them). Tensions are running high in La Barroche. Not only are there these two cults opposed to each other, but the more innocent mass of sisters may not prove so innocent in the company of any male player characters.

### A Cry for Help

As the players travel through a provincial town, they are approached by an anxious-looking man. He identifies himself as the agent of the Viscomte Mervilliers, a local magnate. The Viscomte's beloved daughter Desle has been accused of witchcraft and, according to Mervilliers' representative, is innocent of any such monstrous crime; he claims she has been targeted by the Viscomte's enemies on the council of the local town in which the players are currently staying. There certainly is a dispute between the two, for the council wishes to gain greater jurisdiction over its own affairs, and hopes to quietly arrange some sort of deal while the Viscomte worries over the fate of his daughter. Desle is a fairly plain but intelligent and persuasive young woman, the only surviving relative of her father, who has put all his affections and hopes into her. It was her high level of

education that stirred initial suspicion amongst the local peasants (who see a woman's place as most definitely in the kitchen), which the council picked up on and decided to turn to its advantage. Antoine Anjeux, an eager young witch-hunter out to make a name for himself, has signed a contract with the council, ostensibly to cleanse the town of witches, but by a secret verbal arrangement to charge Desle Mervilliers with witchcraft. A substantial sum has already been given to him; the rest of his payment is to come after the Viscomte has surrendered some of his powers.

The players will be hired by the Viscomte de Mervilliers. Usually renowned as a tough, uncompromising man, he is currently in a state of shock, trembling and weeping with fear for his daughter. He is ready to promise almost anything if she can be proved innocent or somehow brought to safety, but has not yet heard anything of the town council's plan. To try and do this, the players can try anything they like. They might attempt to legally prove Dehl's innocence; more action-minded groups may simply go for a jail break and a quick get away. The best plan is to bring proof of the deal between Anjeux and the council to light, though to do so may well be dangerous. After all, Anjeux would be just as happy to add the players to his tally of victims and will pursue them with the full force of the law.

### Something wicked this way comes

The cities situated on the western coastline of Bretonnia, especially blighted Moussillon, are the stomping ground of wild-eyed avengers who call themselves 'Libertas ab Tenebris'. Their diligent work is undoubtedly beneficial in the area of Moussillon, where just about everyone has some sordid secret they ought to die for. But elsewhere the trouble they cause through indiscriminate slaughter in the name of religion makes for serious trouble with the locals.

Bordeleaux is suffering from an unusually tense situation at the moment thanks to one of these zealots; a situation which the players could find themselves dragged into or hired to resolve. Over the past two months, 14 women (and 5 men) have been found dead in the narrow back streets of the harbour area. Normally the watch takes little note of the deaths of whores and thieves, but all the bodies were found mutilated in a disconcerting and bloody way; all had had their throats cut almost to the spine, 11 had had a pentagram cut into the chest, and the hearts of the other eight had been removed. Moreover, one or two of the victims were respectable and even wealthy, such as old Madame Lesous, widow of a rich merchant. The watch was at a loss to explain the killings, and could do little more than send even more patrols into the shadowy streets around the waterfront.

Now events have taken a turn for the worse. First, 10 days ago, Caehlin Perrithir - a Sea Elf merchant living in the small colony at Bordeleaux, which is sited close to the harbour area where the other human victims were all found - was discovered killed in exactly the same way as the 11 humans; cut through the throat and with a pentagram etched onto his chest. The Elves were aghast at this murder of one of their own, but at first simply put it down to the violence and ignorant that had to be expected

from humans - and Caehlin was always regarded as a bit of a loner anyway. However, three days later the quiet, picturesque Elven colony was awoken in the dead of night by the anguished screams of a second murdered Elf. Eann Freingond was not just a trader like Caehlin, but a highly educated High Elf from Ulthuan, who had come to Bordeleaux, he claimed, to conduct research into the ancient Elven empire. It is feared by the governor that his death could have serious repercussions for relations between the Elves and Bretonnia.

Since then, two more humans have died - one a Marienburger with a removed heart, the other an elderly local woman with a pentagram on her chest - and three copies of a mysterious letter have been sent to the captain of the watch, the governor of Bordeleaux and the chief magistrate of the Sea Elf colony. Alarm bells are ringing all over the city. The watch and the governor are clamouring for decisive action, and the Elves are on the point of leaving the city in outrage. In this divisive letter, signed by 'a defender of truth and purity', the writer claims to have discovered damning evidence of a cult of Khaine led by the Elves (some of whom, including the late Caehlin Perrithir and Eann Freingond, are Dark Elves seeking to spread their insidious presence into the Old World) and numbering many corrupt humans, too. According to the writer of letter, it is this cult which is removing people's hearts. He (or she?) only 'cleanses' victims with the pentagram to save their souls.

Is the letter genuine, and can its statements be proved? Could a meeting be arranged with the 'defender of truth and purity'? How many members of the cult of Khaine survive? Should investigators seek the cult alleged to exist, or try and track down the anonymous 'defender'? And if they were to go after the vigilante, who would deal with the worshippers of murder? But perhaps the most immediate question is what the cultists, if cultists they be, are going to do with the nine hearts they've got in their possession...



# Witch Hunters and Witch-Trials in Bretonnia

By Rory Naismith

*'A seeker of the truth must needs be true of heart and firm of resolution. For the servants of darkness are many, and the powers which are granted to them by their daemonic masters are great indeed. They will not hesitate to lie, kill and blaspheme. For this reason, it is needful that every body and soul be watched and suspected. None can say how the evil ones manifest themselves in their attempts to lead us astray from the path of righteousness. Not a single breathing, living creature must escape our vigilance.'*

- taken from the 'Liber de Maleficiis' by Dominic Gordel

According to the Bretonnians, witch-hunters are those charged with finding witches and bringing them to justice. This is seen as a vital and highly praiseworthy duty, and witch-hunters can become almost rich and famous for sending lots of witches to the stake and making the public feel safer. But the issue is not usually so simple as that. Whilst the majority of common people are glad merely to be told that a witch has been caught and are keen to let populist witch-hunters do the telling (for a price), all too often the more cunning and dangerous real witches go unchallenged. There are some professional witch-hunters, however, who work against the very real threat that worshippers of Chaos and other dark gods present. Equally dedicated to the hunting of witches are the fanatical witch-hunters; zealous and bloody vigilantes who take it upon themselves to cleanse the kingdom.



## Witch-Hunters in Bretonnia

Witch-hunters are far from so common in Bretonnia as they are in the Empire, or as Inquisitors are in Estalia. Indeed, the whole witch-hunt phenomenon is less widespread in Bretonnia than it is elsewhere; it serves primarily as an occasional outlet for general discontent and fear amongst the masses. This means that real witches are often able to pursue their unspeakable practices undisturbed, giving further justification to the activities of witch-hunters; the kingdom is caught in a vicious circle.

Bretonnian witch-hunters are a mixture of clerics and laymen, all of whom must display knowledge of witchcraft, either through knowledge of folklore or learning from scholarly works. To help aspiring witch hunters, the presses of Guisoreux and Parravon turn out many tomes giving long, self-aggrandising accounts of witch trials by famous witch-hunters, but there are also some worthy texts containing genuinely useful information. Many populist witch hunters are the younger

sons of noble families, who have little but self-confidence, arrogance, a taste for high living and a little education to show for their early pampering. They find the position of witch hunter exhilarating and profitable. However, there are others, more professional, who take their duty far more seriously, putting more care into picking out genuine witches and not relying so much on popular fear and unrest to get them a conviction. A small number are driven by deep-seated religious convictions which override all else. They are more vigilante than witch hunter, and kill without a second thought anyone they believe to be a witch or in some other way connected with evil. The authorities and other witch hunters work hard to downplay the gruesome escapades of these fanatical witch hunters.

Most Bretonnian witch-hunters spend more of their time travelling, reading and writing than hurling fiery sermons at terrified peasants. After all, there is only so much ire and bile that can be directed at hapless old women before the mob loses interest. The populist, pleasure-seeking element of witch hunters also enjoys spending the high fees they charge for successfully hunting down witches. On the other hand, when the serious witch hunters do come to pursue a suspected witch after a long intermission, they are all the more determined to put all their energy and effort into the case, whoever the defendant may be and however flimsy the case. For any witch-hunter to have a suspect acquitted or found not guilty is seen as a sign of incompetence and stupidity; something they would never tolerate. They are not above corruption, and can find their professional opinion swayed by large amounts of money and a prudent word or two.

## Publicity and Modus Operandi

### Populist Witch Hunters

Generally, the aristocratic element, which gets involved for the money and excitement, revels in the publicity of huge public trials, surrounded by screaming peasants and comely maidens. The most successful ones - the ones who get the crowds most excited and find the most witches to heckle - become celebrities in their own right, treated with awe and respect by the lower classes and feted by the nobles and rich merchants. They work in the most public way possible, dressing in expensive, well-tailored black and white clothes so as to conform to the public's ideal of a witch hunter. Most wear a plethora of religious emblems, which they brandish and wave about as if the forces of darkness were trying to sneak up behind them. In public, they talk loudly and make a lot of grandiose statements, backed up with a great deal of movement and hand gestures. All of this is very impressive for the peasants, who feel comforted in the presence of someone who so clearly 'knows his stuff' about witches.

Money and fees are probably the greatest concern of populist witch hunters, and they demand substantial payment (as much as 50 gold pieces for the most famous and popular individuals) for every witch convicted. Nevertheless, since fear of witches is not confined to the lower classes, those with the money are glad to pay,

believing that by employing a witch hunter they are doing their bit for the community and ensuring favour with the gods.

Populist witch hunters live a peripatetic life, going from one town to another, sometimes at the request of the local authorities who want to make use of their services. They tend not to work in the countryside unless being employed by a local lord. Not surprisingly, most enjoy a very comfortable and expensive lifestyle, although the ultimate goal is to save enough cash to buy their way into the nobility.

### Professional Witch Hunters

More 'serious' witch hunters only resort to witch trials conducted before a baying mob once all else has failed. To them, getting the right person is generally more important than getting paid. However, that is not to say that the right person is always one whom they ought to be punishing; even witch hunters who seek those they see as witches might in fact be targeting innocents, druids or others with no knowledge of black magic and Chaos, which are their greatest enemies. On the other hand, some very dedicated witch hunters of this kind see all uses of magic outside the regular, accepted clergy as witchcraft; wizards, druids and others find themselves actively hunted down.

Learning and education are the primary weapons the professional witch hunters. All possess a great deal of knowledge about witchcraft, Chaos, Khaine and other occult matters. Most have been to university or undergone training at an important monastery. The majority of professional witch hunters are actually clerics, perhaps members of the religious orders that devote themselves to hunting witches. The order of Saint Antoine (see below) is the largest such group, but there are a few others based in Bretonnia's major cities.

Unlike the popular witch hunters, these dour professionals try not to arouse the emotions of the public, preferring to keep their minds pure and unsullied by darkness (it also makes them less likely to breathe extra colour into witness statements). In fact, they do not even try to attract attention to themselves, usually wearing simple and well-worn clothes to disguise their true purpose. They do not live the rich, luxurious lifestyle of other witch hunters, mainly because their fees are smaller and less frequently paid. Also, nobles and the various arms of local government do not accept them so readily as populist witch hunters, seeing them as at worst interfering and dangerous, at best dull, boring and pedantic. However, it is even more necessary for them to travel than it is for populist witch hunters, as they do not find it so simple to just pick an old woman out of the crowd and brand her a witch. Instead, they conduct careful investigations to try and discover those who might be witches; more often than not their suspicions are unfounded, and they must move on again.

### Fanatical Witch Hunters

A small number of witch hunters try and ensure their victims never even reach a trial; they latch on to suspects and execute them swiftly and with no chance to plead for mercy. They stalk the alleyways and darker corners of

Bretonnian towns and cities with a dagger in one hand, a holy book in the other; nothing can shake these individuals' faith. But this element is small and marginalised; the authorities look on them as crazed vigilantes trying to overreach themselves, and offer hefty rewards for their capture. Even the peasants have very mixed feelings about them: most rightly fear and suspect these religious zealots, but the most pious secretly approve of and sometimes even help their work. Other witch hunters dislike these militants, too, for they tarnish the good relations they have with the public and the government. For the most part, this type of witch hunter is one who has a great deal of faith and (sometimes) a little education; young clerics, initiates, students and the sons of nobles and rich merchants fill their ranks.

The villages in the region of Moussillon in particular are home to many such determined witch hunters, who have taken it upon themselves to prevent the spread of the blight that afflicts the city. They form a loose but feared and powerful brotherhood known as 'Libertas ab Tenebris' (Freedom from the Darkness), which has become a byword for merciless, draconian slaughter and rule through fear. The locals are perhaps as afraid of the avenging knives and swords of Libertas ab Tenebris than they are of the occasional supernatural horrors that emerge from Moussillon.

According to the few rumours that come out of Moussillon, this group was formed some 25 years ago by a zealous witch-hunter called Dolimon Frejus, a wizard who decided to turn to witch-hunting after finding his twin brother, Mael, had devoted himself to daemonology. Whether Dolimon ever caught up with his brother is not known, nor is it certain whether he is still roving the forsaken slums surrounding Moussillon. One or two fanatics have chosen to spread the work of Libertas ab Tenebris to the other large cities of Bretonnia, most notably L'Anguille and Bordeleaux on the coast, which they see as equally full of sin and evil ready to spread into the rest of the kingdom.

### Organisation

There is no central authority regulating witch-hunters; anybody can call themselves a witch-hunter if they want to, but professional witch-hunters normally have some sort of support in their work. Clerics will receive funding and publicity from their cult organisation, which may direct them to suspected cases of witchcraft; some are members of orders particularly dedicated to the hunting and destruction of witches (the largest such order is that of Saint Antoine). Others might attach themselves to a noble, who supplies them with money in return for good publicity with those who attend the trials. It is not unknown for these noble patrons to use their witch-hunters for political ends, having them gather 'evidence' against a particular enemy or to whip up popular anger against witches when the local lord wishes to raise taxes. Some witch-hunters have no regular patron, and work without income except what is taken from witches they discover (one result of being condemned for witchcraft is confiscation of all property; in many cases this part of the sentence is carried out prematurely by acquisitive

neighbours). Temporary contracts are also signed, with nobles, temples or town councils paying a witch-hunter to 'cleanse' their territory over a specified period. Often he will be ordered to root out a set number of witches to his employer's satisfaction; if not enough real witches can be found - which is frequently the case - then he must fulfil his contract by other means, no questions asked.

Professional witch hunters do request a contribution for each witch they discover, but nothing like the extravagant fees demanded by others. They live hard lives, often forced to seek food and shelter at shrines and temples through want of funds. Needless to say, the vigilantes of 'Libertas ab Tenebris' and the ilk would never even think of asking payment for their work; they see themselves as carrying out a crusade. They also consider themselves above the laws of this transitory world; stealing, breaking and entering and committing other crimes does not trouble fanatical witch hunters.

## Witch Trials

Witch trials only come about when a witch-hunter gets involved, for it is they alone who have the will and knowledge to conduct such a procedure correctly. Populist witch hunters are the ones which especially love large and public trials, and the trials detailed below are how they turn out under their direction.

The witch-hunter will have either carried out his own investigations or (more usually) will have been informed that someone is a witch; rewards are offered for those who report on witches, and all denunciations are totally anonymous. He then apprehends the suspect and imprisons them before bringing the unfortunate out for the trial. If in a town, this will be conducted in a courthouse, temple, hall or sometimes in an open square. Rural trials take place either in the local temple or simply wherever an open space can be found. Witch trials are major events, and much of the local population will turn out to watch and listen, alternately jeering, screaming and gasping in horror at what is revealed. The suspect is bound - traditionally with iron manacles - in front of the witch-hunter, who conducts his 'prosecution', listing and embellishing the 'facts' of the case to gain maximum reaction amongst the assembled crowd. Witnesses are called to back up the witch-hunter, and are always primed - and sometimes bribed - beforehand. Virtually no-one is prepared to challenge the word of the witch-hunter or any witnesses, partly through sheer enjoyment of the spectacle, and partly through fear of being challenged with charges of witchcraft themselves.

It is helpful, though not essential, for the witch-hunter to obtain a confession from the suspect; they set the seal on anything the witch-hunter might say, giving a measure of justification. Confronted with the twin pressures of a fierce witch-hunter and a crazed mob, some submit instantly, agreeing to anything put to them in hope of ending the trial. Others are reticent, and stubbornly refuse to admit to the accusations laid against them. In this case, the witch-hunters either take no notice and go straight on to passing sentence (after all, they expect witches to try and deny their activities), or else tortures the suspect. All manner of tortures might be employed, and many witch-

hunters travel with a torturer or else make use of the facilities in local prisons or castle dungeons. See below for a list of tortures sometimes used in Bretonnia.

Once the trial is done and (hopefully) a confession has been produced, the witch-hunter then either accepts the verdict of the assembled mob (which is nearly always a resounding 'guilty!') or, if the trial is taking place before local magistrates or juries, he turns to them for reckoning. Under Bretonnian law, it is technically up to these groups to judge all cases, even witchcraft, with the witch-hunter merely serving to bring in and prosecute the witches. However, in the face of a wild-eyed witch-hunter and an enraged crowd of citizens, there are few judges brave enough to declare anything other than a guilty verdict. In spite of this, there are a few enlightened councils and clerics who do dare to insist on firmer evidence than most witch-hunters provide, or even refuse to sanction the use of torture. Unfortunately, most such radical demands are made when the suspect is wealthy or aristocratic; the authorities may have already received a hefty bribe, or else expect to get one after the trial.

For those found guilty of witchcraft, the sentence is invariably harsh. Death is by far the most common punishment meted out; burning, drowning, hanging and beheading are all used in various regions of Bretonnia. More often than not the execution is carried out in public, to the delight of assembled spectators. On rare occasions, wealthy witches might escape the death sentence, but only in return for a forfeit of all lands and titles, arranged surreptitiously with the witch-hunter or the local legal authorities. Known wizards who are found guilty of witchcraft (that is, of using black magic or of using magic to harm others and commit crimes) may either be executed or else sent to Guisoreux to have the Iron Brand applied. Said to have been crafted ages past by St Marc in order to defeat the fabled sorcerer Duc de Brisolles, anyone who is marked with the Iron Brand is permanently deprived of all magical powers. It is kept in a deep and highly-guarded dungeon in Guisoreux, and prisoners are sent under close escort from all over the kingdom. The loss of magical power - that which defines a wizard's very existence - is a shameful and debilitating punishment for most magicians.

Professional witch hunters' trials take place in private (often in a temple), usually without the public even knowing what is going on. This is because more often than not the individual on trial is more than likely a genuine witch; there would undoubtedly be a panic if such knowledge were to be made public.

The magistrates regulating these trials are either clerics or highly respected lawyers, officials and professionals who can bring their skills and wisdom to bear on the case. In fact, it is far from unknown for them to actually find the defendant innocent if the witch hunter's case is not convincing enough.

## Other Creatures

Although witches are the most common victims of witch hunters, that is not to say they are alone. Professional and fanatical witch hunters see themselves as general preservers of the religious and spiritual equilibrium, in the

same way as the king and his government are supposed to keep order in secular life. For this reason, all threats of this kind are dealt with. Vampires, evil wizards, lycanthropes, ghosts, the undead and incursions of Chaos might all be tackled by devoted witch hunters, but most still see witches as their primary enemy, not least because they are (or are at least thought to be) far more numerous than these other dangers. Also, it doesn't take that much hunting, usually, to deal with many of these horrors, which present a far greater prospect of swift and painful death; many witch hunters, even professionals and some fanatics, are quite happy to stick to witches and call in someone else when they come against anything different.

If they find themselves going up against enemies with physical as well as magical or spiritual powers, then witch hunters are not averse to calling on the public, the king and the nobility to help them. Whether these individuals have the guts or not to face such dangers is another question; witch hunters may assemble a crowd eager to save their home from some occult peril, but there are far fewer ready to confront that peril in person (as the unfortunate witch hunter may find to his cost when things start to look bad).

Populist witch hunters, although they might sometimes throw in an accusation of vampirism or consorting with the dead to keep their trials fresh and entertaining, will normally blanch at the thought of tackling anything really dangerous. At best they will hand the case over to a professional witch hunter (very quietly, with a good excuse, so as not to ruin their reputation) and get out of town; at worst they will just get out of town and try to forget they ever saw anything.

## **The Order of Saint Antoine**

The order of Saint Antoine is the largest, oldest and most powerful clerical order dedicated to hunting witches. It is made up of priests of Verena (and a few of Morr, Myrmidia, Ulric and Shallya) who are empowered by special royal order to hunt down witches and other supernatural menaces to the kingdom.

St Antoine was a priest of Verena who lived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and was famous for his erudition and determination to rid the land of witches. After moving to the great city of Couronne, Antoine attracted far more fame and support, receiving requests to travel all over Bretonnia to help combat witches. The King at the time, Bernard II le Pieux, was famous for his religious conviction, and gave a great deal of support to Antoine. Eventually he went so far as to grant the cleric special powers allowing Antoine to travel anywhere in the kingdom to hunt witches with full royal support. On Antoine's death, Bernard again assisted in effecting the cleric's final request: that an order of like-minded priests be set up to carry on his work. Ever since, the order of Saint Antoine, with monetary help from the king, the Cardinal of Verena and from other generous patrons, has continued to hunt witches. Although the order has shrunk somewhat in the last few decades, it remains free from corruption, as only those clerics truly committed to its cause choose to join nowadays. When conducting their duty, members of the order work closely with local

temples and judicial authorities, which usually support them thanks to the reputation the order enjoys across the land; clerics in particular see the order of Saint Antoine as a force to be obeyed and respected, partly because it is well known that the head of the order has the ear of the Cardinal of Verena. On a few occasions, foreign rulers in Estalia, Tilea, the Border Princes and the Empire have asked for members of the order of Saint Antoine to aid them. There is actually a small Tilean branch of the order of Saint Antoine active in the south-western Empire.

The temple to Verena dedicated to Saint Antoine in Couronne is the headquarters of the order, which maintains a few temples, shrines and other facilities (including, it is rumoured, torture chambers) in the largest cities of Bretonnia. Its current head is Martin d'Arromanches, a venerable but tough and clever priest of Verena. Members are supported by pensions given from the order's funds, although these are not large; donations to the order have also fallen in recent times. Nevertheless, the order of Saint Antoine is still very widely respected and does sterling work in protecting the spirits of all Bretonnians.

## **Bretonnian Witch-Hunters and Game Rules**

As you might expect from reading the above, Bretonnian witch hunters are a little different to the witch hunter detailed in the Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay rulebook. The Witch Hunter advanced career is essentially for a far more militant Imperial-style witch hunter who relies mainly on force of arms and unswerving determination to do his job. This career would, however, work very well for a fanatical witch hunter in Bretonnia; someone driven to kill without compunction and pursuing a personal crusade against witches. They would certainly have need of the weapons skills here, although the GM may decide not to let them have access to the Public Speaking skill; after all, they don't get many opportunities to address the crowds. Also, entry to this career should work differently; it would take some very profound experience, or the encouragement of a current witch hunter, to get someone to turn to this career. Turning aside after adopting this path would be very hard indeed. As such, the career entry rules should be more flexible.

Professional witch hunters would probably not actually follow the 'witch hunter' career as it is listed in the rulebook. Rather, witch-hunter would be a title they ascribe to themselves that describes what they do, not just what they are; most would actually be Scholars, Lawyers, Clerics, Wizards or possibly Templars. All should also have access to skills representing knowledge of witchcraft, such as History, Identify Magical Artifact, Magical Awareness and Secret Language – Classical; really learned witch hunters may even know Arcane Language – Demonic or Speak Additional Language – Dark Tongue. In addition to these skills, which could be acquired by spending time in study or working with another witch hunter, a professional witch hunter should have access to all normal skills and trappings from their regular career.

Populist witch hunters would most definitely not follow the Witch Hunter advanced career. Most would be

Demagogues, or at least Agitators, representing their rabble-rousing nature. In addition to their normal trappings, they would also have a set of sombre black clothes (this is how the public thinks witch hunters ought to dress) and one or more hefty tomes on witchcraft (which are used more for show than anything else, to be dramatically consulted or quoted from at the climax of a trial).



## Torture in Bretonnia

*'Can I truly be called a man now? I have screamed my heart and soul out, I have lain bare my innermost fears and hopes for the perusal of villeins. Before I came to this place, I was the favourite of my lovers for my skill at music. Now I shall be fortunate if I can take my beauty by the hand ever again without crying out...I hope you are satisfied, my friend.'*

- Le Comte de Louanges, after being tortured for treason

Those being tried for witchcraft and other serious crimes such as treason, murder, theft, and rape are often threatened with torture. Generally the rich are exempt from torture, whilst the poorest members of society might go through agony just for stealing a loaf of bread. Bretonnia is at least imaginative if not always consistent or efficient when it comes to torture; many different types of are used, some far more violent, cruel and bloody than others.

The severity of torture is not always what might be expected; one suspected witch might simply be treated with thumbscrews or the rack, whilst another criminal may be unfortunate enough to be subjected to Strappado. Some are not tortured at all. In general, however, the very worst tortures - Squassation, the Thousand Cuts and the Iron Maiden - are rare and reserved for the most serious crimes; traitors, genuine witches and worse. Throughout every application of torture, the victim is constantly asked to confess to their crimes or to reveal what the torturer wants to know, sometimes with soft and sweet murmurings, at other times with curses, screams and physical blows.

Most judicial authorities in Bretonnia have access to torture facilities in their prison or in the local lord's dungeon; large towns also possess private, semi-legal torture chambers where - for a price - the most excruciating methods can be used to elicit information from victims.

Some of the methods of torture used in Bretonnia are detailed below. In game terms, every time a person is subjected to torture, they should make a Will Power test, with modifiers either for the severity of the torture or for the number of times it has been applied. Generally, each application of torture after the first in the same session will carry a cumulative -10% modifier; especially severe tortures such as the Thousand Cuts, Squassation or the Iron Maiden will also carry an additional modifier to Will Power of -10% or more. Thus, the first application of normal torture is made with no modification to Will Power, but the second application causes a -10% penalty, and the third -20%. More serious torture would have an initial -10% modifier, rising to -20% on the second application and so on.

If any test is failed, then the subject confesses to whatever the torturer wants them to, whether the confession is genuine or not. Note that torture need not necessarily cause many wounds; its object is to cause maximum pain, not always crippling injury. In fact, obvious evidence of excessive torture is sometimes enough to swing the authorities in the opposite direction, since a public outcry would result otherwise. The Thumbscrews and the Rack inflict one wound for the first use, about one Wound for every two times it is applied after the first, or for every two levels the severity is increased. For instance, a witch who is first put on the Rack and refuses to confess suffers one Wound; assuming she holds her tongue, no Wound is suffered the second time the Rack is tightened, but another Wound would be suffered the next (third) time. On the other hand, Squassation, Strappado and the Iron Maiden would be very dangerous, causing at least D3+3 wounds per use, or as much as D6+4 for Squassation.

In addition, every time torture is applied deduct one from the victim's Toughness. When this characteristic reaches zero, they pass out and, if left without proper medical care, may well die after suffering some of the more severe tortures.

**Thumb-screws (or Gresillons):** a vice is used to crush the victim's thumbs. This is a very common torture for witches in Bretonnia, as it leaves few marks for people to use to challenge the witch-hunter's methods.

**Strappado:** a torture imported from Tilea, in which the victim's hands are tied behind their back and fitted to a hoist. This is then used to lift the unfortunate subject up, so that eventually their arms and shoulders are dislocated. Weights might be attached to the limbs to increase the agony.

**Squassation:** a particularly savage Bretonnian adaptation of the above. After being raised above the ground, their shoulders already dislocated and heavy weights attached to their limbs, the hoist is suddenly slackened so that they drop several feet before the rope is tightened again. Those put through squassation can have every bone in their body dislocated or broken; sometimes their arms are actually

pulled out. Few survive more than one or two applications, and those who do are ready to confess to anything...if they're still conscious. In one famous case of a genuine witch - eventually burnt at the stake - Margherite Dolcine endured no less than nine applications of Squassation, merely laughing each time the dumbfounded and increasingly frightened torturers put her through it.

**Pricking:** based on the idea that all witches have a 'cold' mark somewhere on their body where the dark gods have applied their blessing. The suspect is stripped and shaved all over - often in public - then pricked hundreds of times with a pin or small knife to try and find their 'witches' mark'. Pain and blood loss force many into a premature confession; few if any victims actually have a 'witches' mark'.

**The rack:** the victim is attached by their wrists and ankles to a pulley which is gradually tightened.

**Estalian Boots:** as the name suggests, this torture came originally from Estalia. The victim's feet are enclosed in two 'boots': vices which enclose the legs, sometimes just four pieces of wood bound tightly together. These are then either tightened by hand, or else wedges are hammered in, shattering bone and crushing flesh.

**Thrawing:** the victim has one or more ropes tied round their neck, by which they are jerked violently about. This can be far more dangerous and painful than it sounds, especially with burly torturers and stone cells involved.

**Water torture:** this painful but complex torture involves forcing a flexible pipe attached to a large barrel of water into the subject's mouth and throat, forcing them to drink constantly even as the pipe is forced down their gullet into the stomach. When it reaches the stomach, the pipe is sharply withdrawn - often causing internal injuries, occasional disembowling and always immense pain - and the process begins again if the victim still refuses to confess.

**The Thousand Cuts:** a rare and especially barbaric torture in which the victim is tied naked to a stake and the torturer cuts off fingers, ears and lumps of flesh until they confess.

**Pincers:** red hot pincers are used to burn and tear pieces of skin from the victim.

**The Flaming Agony:** the victim's feet or hands are placed in lead or leather boxes, which are then filled either with boiling water or fat, or with molten metal.

**The Iron Maiden:** thought to be an Imperial import, this rare, bloody and usually fatal torture requires a specially prepared box shaped like an upright coffin (often with a beautiful maiden carved on the lid, hence the name). Once the victim is placed in the coffin, a lid fitted with long spikes is closed over them so that the spikes pierce their flesh. They might then be left in the iron maiden, bleeding and suffering ever greater agony until either the coffin is opened or the subject expires.

## Ordeals

Ordeals are another common form of trying a witch, usually resorted to in the absence of a witch-hunter. They are based on the ancient lore of peasant society, and as can be seen they do have a great deal of rationality behind them. Even so, the placebo effect is a documented fact (even in Bretonnia), and it is possible that calling on the help of good, lawful deities can impart some genuine power to these superstitions.

The basic concept of trial by ordeal is to put the suspected witch through some sort of test to prove whether or not she (or he) is a witch. These revered customs can be carried out even by the most simple of peasants, who relish the opportunity to do something out of the ordinary or to get themselves back on a hated member of the community.

Typical ordeals include

**Swimming:** This involves throwing the witch into the nearest well, pond or stream to see if she floats. Those who float are witches; those who sink are innocent but often drown anyway as few spectators have either the will or the initiative to drag them out.

**Ordeal by fire:** This ordeal requires the suspect grasping a heated iron bar and carrying it twenty paces. If the subsequent burn, after being bound for a week, has healed then the suspect is a witch; if it festers then they are innocent.

**Ordeal by faith:** In this trial, the 'witch' is called upon to recite a certain Classical catechism against dark magic, which they are allowed to hear once before having to repeat it back. If the suspect makes the slightest error in pronunciation or pauses significantly then they are guilty. Many villages will entrust their eldest male resident with learning this catechism, which is known as 'La preuve des fees'. A rough translation of it would be: '*Undone be ye legions of darkness, and begone from this place. May our hearts be bold and let our words be true, and may ye trouble us no more*'.

**Waking and walking:** This trial is particularly favoured by more 'lenient' authorities, since it is far less cruel and messy than other trials and tortures. Basically, the witch is deprived of sleep. They are placed into a perpetually lit room, covered so no difference can be told between night and day, and left bound up with guards in constant attendance. Whenever the suspect looks to be going off to sleep, the guards (who are rotated so as not to allow any slackening) shake them into wakefulness and douse them with cold water. Few can sustain this trial for longer than a few days, and are then ready to confess to anything before at last being allowed to rest in peace.

