



Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages (The Middle Ages Series)

Stephen A. Mitchell

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Stephen A. Mitchell here offers the fullest examination available of witchcraft in late medieval Scandinavia. He focuses on those people believed to be able—and who in some instances thought themselves able—to manipulate the world around them through magical practices, and on the responses to these beliefs in the legal, literary, and popular cultures of the Nordic Middle Ages. His sources range from the Icelandic sagas to cultural monuments much less familiar to the nonspecialist, including legal cases, church art, law codes, ecclesiastical records, and runic spells.

Mitchell's starting point is the year 1100, by which time Christianity was well established in elite circles throughout Scandinavia, even as some pre-Christian practices and beliefs persisted in various forms. The book's endpoint coincides with the coming of the Reformation and the onset of the early modern Scandinavian witch hunts. The terrain covered is complex, home to the Germanic Scandinavians as well as their non-Indo-European neighbors, the Sámi and Finns, and it encompasses such diverse areas as the important trade cities of Copenhagen, Bergen, and Stockholm, with their large foreign populations; the rural hinterlands; and the insular outposts of Iceland and Greenland.

By examining witches, wizards, and seeresses in literature, lore, and law, as well as surviving charm magic directed toward love, prophecy, health, and weather, Mitchell provides a portrait of both the practitioners of medieval Nordic magic and its performance. With an understanding of mythology as a living system of cultural signs (not just ancient sacred narratives), this study also focuses on such powerful evolving myths as those of "the milk-stealing witch," the diabolical pact, and the witches' journey to Blåkulla. Court cases involving witchcraft, charm magic, and apostasy demonstrate that witchcraft ideologies played a key role in conceptualizing gender and were themselves an important means of exercising social control.

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