WITCHCRAFT AND SORCERY IN THE LATER ROMAN EMPIRE AND THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

An anthropological comment

John O. Ward

Peter Brown’s article ‘Sorcery, Demons and the rise of Christianity: from late Antiquity into the Middle Ages’ has achieved the status of a minor classic. Twice printed, it is described in a recent work on medieval magic, witchcraft and law as ‘the best and most recent study of the position of magic in the fourth and fifth century Roman Empire’. Part of the article’s success is perhaps due to its pioneering use of anthropological models, in particular, the ‘fertile suggestions’ contained in Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger*, but much of its popularity surely derives from its author’s widely reputed skill at delineating lines of consciousness and threads of socio-economic change in the turbulent, creative and fascinating period that lies between the conversion of Constantine and the beginnings of the conversion of the English. Although Brown has himself qualified some of his assumptions in the article, there have been to my knowledge no challenges or replies to it. The purpose of the present note is to suggest that this situation should be remedied.

Brown is seeking to explain the social significance of an apparent increase in sorcery accusations in the mid-fourth century A.D. His thesis is ‘that a precise malaise in the structure of the governing classes of the Roman Empire (especially in its eastern Greek-speaking half) forced the ubiquitous


5. What follows is the central portion of a study I have in draft on the significance of anthropological models for an understanding of medieval witchcraft. I have omitted a lengthy analysis of the language of the *Codex Theodosianus* in terms taken from Mary Douglas’ writings. I hope to publish the rest of the study at a later stage.

sorcery beliefs of ancient man to a flash-point of accusations in the mid-fourth century A.D. The incidence of these accusations synchronises with changes within the structure of the governing classes: thus they reach a peak at a time of maximum uncertainty and conflict in the "new" society of the mid-fourth century: they are substantially reduced as occasions for conflict and uncertainty are progressively restricted by a growth of political and social stability, the results of which are best documented for the sixth century A.D.: the age of Justinian and of the first "barbarian" kingdoms in the West ... as late Roman society grew more stable and defined, in the course of the sixth century, so sorcery accusations seem to have waned ... in the West, the triumph of the great landowners ensured that senatorial blood, episcopal office and sanctity presented a formidable united front; any form of uncontrolled religious power received short shrift in the circle of Gregory of Tours'.

'Sorcery beliefs in the Later Empire, therefore, may be used like radio-active traces in an X-ray: where these assemble, we have a hint of pockets of uncertainty and competition in a society increasingly committed to a vested hierarchy in church and state ... to fear and suppress the sorcerer is an extreme assertion of the Single Image. Many societies that have sorcery-beliefs do not go out of their way to iron out the sorcerer. The society, or group within the society, that actually acts on its fears is usually the society that feels challenged, through conflict, to uphold an image of itself in which everything that happens, happens through articulate channels only, where power springs from vested authority, where admiration is gained by conforming to recognised norms of behaviour, where the gods are worshipped in public, and where wisdom is the exclusive preserve of the traditional educational machine'.

'Inarticulate' channels of power refer to 'the disturbing intangibles of social life; the imponderable advantages of certain groups; personal skills that succeed in a way that is unacceptable or difficult to understand'.

In the fourth century the holders of articulate power are the parvenus, the new aristocracy of service of the soldier emperors, of recent and humble origin, with fixed vested roles, whilst the holders of inarticulate power are

8. Brown, pp.130-31. In the 'circle' of Gregory of Tours, perhaps, but not in the 'society' of Gregory: perusal of the references to witchcraft in the pages of the History of the Franks suggests that witchcraft functioned as a technique of social advancement in extremely competitive situations where social tensions were pronounced. The episode of the palace conspiracy against Queen Faileuba, second wife of the Merovingian King Childebert II (d.595 A.D.), is an example (Gregory of Tours, History of the Franks, IX.38, trans. Lewis Thorpe, Penguin, 1974, pp.524-6).
11. Ibid.
the older senatorial aristocracy and the educated elite, the professors of rhetoric and philosophy of the great Mediterranean cities. Accusations of sorcery are levelled by the parvenu class at the holders of inarticulate power who believe in and blame sorcery for interruptions to their success, and themselves, as in the case of Libanius, make use of sorcery accusations; typically, perhaps, the fall of Boethius was accompanied by accusations of sorcery. The parvenu, or major accusing groups, are Christian and occupy a recognised place in the civilian and military hierarchy of the Empire. Famous charioteers and other charismatic organisers of the lower classes, a fluid group that includes, incidentally, clergy and holy men, are mediators in urban society, sometimes making accusations of sorcery to advance themselves, sometimes being the butt of charges of sorcery. It is in this class that Brown seems to locate the professional sorcerer, although the evidence of Ammianus Marcellinus does not specifically or exclusively locate knowledge and use of the Black arts (in connection with crimes involving poisoning, administration of love-potions and adultery) among this ‘demi-monde’.

The article is, in fact, disturbingly vague at this point, but the implications seem to be that accusations of sorcery appear when articulate and inarticulate power systems do not coincide altogether, yet overlap to the extent that they are not entirely unconnected with each other: then the various parties vent their uncertainty and fear by sorcery beliefs and accusations, in which members of the fluid ‘mediator’ class are seen as the ones possessed of occult powers (especially maleficium) which the holders of inarticulate power are accused of employing for their own success pattern, and which these classes, in turn, to explain failures in their own performances, accuse others of using against them.

Brown then tries to explain what he calls a decline of sorcery accusations and beliefs: ‘as Late Roman Society became more fixed’ Christianity

15. Brown, pp.129-30. It should be noted, as an aside, that Codex Theodosianus (CTh) 9.16.6 locates sorcery in the imperial comitatus.
16. This is, in fact, an inference from Mary Douglas’ Purity and Danger. Brown, pp.128-29. Evidence discussed by R. MacMullen, Enemies of the Roman Order, (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), ch.4 esp. pp.136-38, ch.3 esp. pp.120-21, 126-27 and also p.94 where MacMullen speaks of a social ‘slide’ on the part of the dominant classes, suggests that professional, practising astrologers, diviners and prophets (astrologi, mathematici, chaldaei, (h)aruspices, augures, vates, vaticinatores, coniectores, (h)arioli, magi etc.) were predominantly from the lesser orders of society, though learned in the subjects they made use of (cf. MacMullen, pp.135-36 citing Ammianus Marcellinus 29.1.29-32).
gradually shouldered the sorcerer out (‘effected a détente in sorcery beliefs’19), and dealt directly with the source of maleficium, an invoked demon, acting as an agent of Satan, rather than with the mediating sorcerer as a manipulator of unseen/unknown evil forces stemming in part from a measure of professional expertise on the sorcerer’s part.20 Christianity, therefore, offered group immunity from sorcery and Satan upon the performance of prescribed Christian ritual actions. From this development Brown traces the ‘snowball’ effect of Christian popularity and emphasises the Holy Man as an anti-dote to the sorcerer.

In this proposition Brown is reversing a common assumption (and one that he quotes elsewhere)21 in African anthropology: the onset of a new religion or the advent of a new culture deprives tribes of their traditional means of securing themselves against the operation of the occult, and hence increases insecurity and reliance for defence on occult counter-measures. Brown supposes22 that Christianity by-passed the sorcerer as a human agent of supernatural powers and provided people with supernatural defences direct from the supernatural (that is, God) without the need for a human agent, if we except the priest who presides over the correct cult actions. The sociology of this development, in Brown’s handling of it, is curious: the appeal to sorcery by the professors and senators derives from their urge to normalise aberrations in their ‘stable, well-oriented world’.23 The Christian (lower) classes ‘most exposed to fluidity and uncertainty’,24 who at one

20. Cf. Gregory of Tours HF VI.29 (Thorpe, p.357): a man possessed by the devil refers to ‘my own master, he whom you call the Devil’. It is interesting to note that the entry of ‘diabolism’ into the definition and understanding of witchcraft has been variously invoked by historians to explain crucial developments in the period that attracts them. Richard Kieckhefer European Witch Trials: their foundations in popular and learned culture 1300-1500, (London, 1976), explains a crucial change in the apparent contemporary understanding of witchcraft in terms of a ‘clericiizing’ of popular notions, ‘an intensification of concern for diabolism’ in the period 1375-1435 A.D. (p.18); Norman Cohn (Europe’s Inner Demons, Paladin, 1976, pp.233, 237), similarly dates the process whereby popular notions of maleficium are supplanted by learned notions of diabolism to the fifteenth century. In the British Journal of Sociology, 29 (1978), 171ff. A. Anderson and R. Gordon (‘Witchcraft and the status of women—the case of England’) put forward the attractive thesis that the entry of diabolism into later medieval continental witchcraft accusations represents a form of ‘masculinisation’ of the skills associated with the practice of witchcraft. This ‘masculinisation’ of hitherto predominantly female expertise, they argue, could only have taken place where the status of women was low or in process of being depressed. A phenomenon reserved, therefore, by a number of historians, to the later Middle Ages, is here advanced by Peter Brown as, essentially, a late antique, early medieval phenomenon.
22. Ibid.
are firing accusations of sorcery against (pagan) patricians, at another point, are not in a position to appeal to sorcery as an explanation of misfortune because they by-pass the human sorcerer/agent to deal with God/Satan directly as senders of angels, demons and holy men. Brown is at pains to show that the concept of sorcerer as a human manipulator of occult powers is alien to Christianity and is replaced by the specifically Christian, Mediterranean (i.e. non-Germanic) concept of a witch-human who by compact with Satan has put her/himself outside Christian society: as the social structure has become more uniform and social boundaries have become clear and rigid (Brown does not say so but he implies that ‘articulate’ and ‘inarticulate’ sources of power have now come back into phase), evil cannot be seen to exist within the community, cannot be available to all who acquire the requisite skill; evil is a cosmic force outside society which seduces and detaches the weaker elements within it for its own purposes. Society ideologically and sociologically has become homogeneous, clear, ‘tidy’, ‘more stable and defined’. There are, however, many quite ‘untidy’ aspects of Brown’s presentation of these developments, aspects not adequately emended by later comments: the role of Christianity and Christians in sorcery accusations and in the by-passing, or ‘outmoding’ of sorcery, and the functional relationship between social groups and the sorcery accusation. There are purely historical problems too. For example, central to Brown’s anthropological

27. As indeed, in parallel fashion, the Holy Man was placed ‘outside society’—Brown ‘Parting’, pp.13ff. and 21ff.
29. For example, in ‘Parting’, p.17, n.70, Brown suggests his estimation of the ‘fixed’, ‘settled’, ‘tidy’ nature of early medieval Christian society is ‘exaggerated’. In another ‘retraction’ Brown again casts aside the ‘certainty’ of early medieval social structure: Relics and social status in the age of Gregory of Tours, Stenton Lecture for 1976, p.17. In this latter paper relic cults emerge as a kind of litmus paper of social adjustment—like witchcraft accusations in the article presently under discussion.
30. The historical context of the accusations is commented on in a number of works: J. Matthews, Western Aristocracies and the Imperial Court, AD 364-425 (Oxford, 1975), chapters 1-3 (Matthews, p.48 writes of the ‘fluidity’ of the (Pannonian) palatini and provincial bureaucracy as a class), MacMullen Enemies ch.3, Barb in Momigliano, pp.110ff., E. A. Thompson, The Historical Works of Ammianus Marcellinus (Cambridge, 1947), pp.101-7. A. Alföldi, however, in A Conflict of Ideas in the Later Roman Empire (Oxford, 1952), pp.65-80 best puts the cautions that must accompany use of Ammianus’ evidence. He notes Ammianus’ wild prejudice against the Pannonians and his consequent reasons for inflating the frequency and horrors of the trials against Senators. There is, he suggests (p.68), every good reason for supposing that Ammianus would have had no interest in accusations that were not levelled by the parvenus against the Senatorial class. Ammianus has, in fact, exaggerated the one-sidedness, illegality, shock and sensation of these trials, though they did cause some panic among the
functionalism is the increased incidence of sorcery accusations in the fourth century, yet he admits\textsuperscript{31} that ‘we happen to know more about sorcery because we are told more about it’ in this period. I leave aside the difficult historical task of establishing without doubt that there was a distinct quantifiable upsurge in charges of poisoning (so often the essence of a magic charge)\textsuperscript{32} in the later fourth century, and a distinct decline thereafter\textsuperscript{33} and concentrate on attempting a clarification of the rather blurred sociology of witchcraft, magic, religion and sorcery that Brown seems to be advocating and using to guide his presentation.

Notwithstanding a certain unwillingness to make clear the nature of his use of Mary Douglas’ \textit{Purity and Danger} (which he acknowledges),\textsuperscript{34} Brown is, in the first instance, alluding to a normal enough (by African standards) function of witchcraft: the normalisation of unacceptable or threatening inequality in a time of change and stress. There is little in the scholarship on African witchcraft that might lead us to restrict witchcraft to relations between parvenus and senators/professors, rather than to ‘pockets of uncertainty and competition’ within particular social groupings.\textsuperscript{35} The nobility and may have claimed quite a few as their victim. Ammianus’ motives are discussed in H. Funke ‘Majestäts—and Magieprozesse bei Ammianus Marcellinus’, \textit{Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum}, 10(1967)175, with a detailed review of the legal situation and the trials themselves (pp.145-74). For Brown’s analysis, cf. such passages as Ammianus 28.1.10 ‘... nobiles aliquos, tamquam usos artificibus laedendi per clientes aliosque humiles, notos reos et indices supra plantam...’. 

\textsuperscript{31}Brown, p.122.

\textsuperscript{32}Venena as magic potions: CTh. 9.38.6, Matthews 56, n.2, MacMullen \textit{Enemies} 124f. Ammianus uses the term \textit{veneficus} frequently, and as often J. C. Rolfe, the Loeb translator, renders in terms such as to suggest ‘magic’: Ammianus 29.1.44 ‘ut veneficus reus citatus est’ Rolfe Loeb III, p.213 ‘as guilty of magic’; 29.3.5 ‘veneficiis usus incessebatur’ Rolfe p.237 ‘magic arts’; 29.2.2 ‘veneficiorum notitia pollutos’ Rolfe p.215 ‘stained themselves with a knowledge of magic’; 29.2.19 ‘venenis necasse’; 28.1.27 ‘quod eiusdem conscii veneficiis’; 28.1.8 ‘venenis’; 29.1.5 ‘ut veneficum a memoratis conductum’; 26.3.1 ‘veneficos’ trans. Rolfe II, 581 as ‘sorcerers’; 19.13.4 ‘ut veneficus’ etc. Thomas S. Szasz \textit{The Manufacture of Madness} (Paladin, 1973), p.38 writes ‘the word “witch” comes from a Hebrew word that has been rendered \textit{venefica} in Latin, and “witch” in English’. The original meaning of the word was apparently ‘poisoner, dabbler in magical spells, fortune-teller’, from \textit{venenum} ‘anything, esp. any liquid substance, that powerfully affects or changes the condition of the body’ (Lewis and Short s.v.); extension to include ‘sorcery’ in general is classical. For the professional magician of the period Brown is dealing with see Barb, pp.112f.

\textsuperscript{33}Brown, p.130.

\textsuperscript{34}Brown, p.125 n.1, p.136 n.5. Douglas’ \textit{Natural Symbols} was not yet available to Brown.

\textsuperscript{35}Brown, p.128’ cf. above n.15. Brown, p.126 insists that ‘these accusations are rarely made by the parvenus of the court among themselves: they are usually made by such groups against the holders of ill-defined traditional status, to “shake the pillars of the patrician class”’. Yet, although the majority of Ammianus’ accusations are (naturally) made against senators, some are made against the lower orders (organ-builder, wrestler, soothsayer, cf. 28.1.8), against public advocates (28.1.14), some do not involve the patricians or courtiers (29.2.19); 29.2.17 is
extent of Brown’s debt to functional anthropology and sociology is obscured by certain incongruencies between discrete African societies, and complicated western societies, within the latter of which, groups appear to function like ‘mini-tribal’ groups. Yet it is not the internal functioning of witchcraft accusations within the group that Brown is concerned with (as the African analogy would lead us to expect), but the inter-group function of the witchcraft accusation (here the analogy might rather be with Oceania, were it not for the fact that groups within Roman society—patricii, palatini, mediators etc.—do interact within the same society, though not in the close kinship linked, tribal or neighbourhood fashion assumed by African witchcraft anthropology). This is partly a matter of Brown’s (or Ammianus’) emphasis, and partly a dictate required by the model Brown is using, Mary Douglas’ Purity and Danger. The relevant passages of this book propose the following equation:

| Ill-articulated areas, inarticulate powers, ‘unform’ | EXPLICIT AUTHORITY, |
| marginal areas of society, dangerously ambiguous roles, uncontrolled, unconscious, internal powers (witchcraft, the evil eye, gifts of vision or prophecy) used to check failure in ‘interstitial’ roles. | EXERCISING CONTROLLED, |
| | EXTERNAL (SPELLS, BLESSINGS, CURSES, CHARMS, FORMULAS, INVOCATIONS) POWERS |
| | USED TO CHECK FAILURE IN OFFICIAL ROLES. |
| | Interstices of the power structure |
| | WELL-ARTICULATED AREA OF THE SOCIAL SYSTEM, ARTICULATE POWER. ‘FORM’ |

a case of blatant protection of a lesser man (tribune) against a charge of sorcery and 29.1.5 is an accusation clearly against the palatinos, by a ‘Procopius quidam’. Cf. Funke 170, 173 n.158, 166; Matthews p.63 cites from Ammianus charges not involving senators. Cf. above n.30.

37. Yet cf. MacMullen Enemies, p.94: ‘internal opposition in the Empire was not a matter of enemies aiming at each other across a gulf of difference, but rather of hostility between persons who were close neighbours in a cultural and social sense...’ M. K. Hopkins, among others, emphasises social mobility in the period (‘Social mobility in the Later Roman Empire: the
'The inarticulate, unstructured areas emanate unconscious powers which provoke others to demand that ambiguity be reduced'.\textsuperscript{38} Witchcraft is found in non-structure. The witchcraft accusation is a 'means of exerting control where practical forms of control are difficult'. Hence the normalising function of the witchcraft accusation and the absence of witchcraft accusations from certain difficult, but 'basic', 'form-ful' 'structured' relationships.\textsuperscript{39} Where the division between 'form' and 'uniform', explicit articulate authority and implicit inarticulate power is weak or unclear, then 'external' power is available to anyone, as indeed is political power in general. Weak political structures, competitive social situations therefore raise the level of non-or un-structure in society.

The relevance of this 'model' to Brown's interpretation of the significance of sorcery accusations in the later fourth century A.D. is obvious: the authority structure is weak, sorcery is available to all as a means of correcting/checking failure in official roles; the sorcerer is located in interstitial marginal areas (compare the 'interstructural role' of the Kachin wife\textsuperscript{40} with Brown's 'demi-monde').\textsuperscript{41} Brown ignores, however, Mary Douglas' distinction between 'external' and 'internal' power, and their location in terms of failure-expectation in official roles and failure-expectation in interstitial roles.\textsuperscript{42} He sees sorcery and the sorcerer as not available to all in society (certainly not 'exercised by' explicit authority against inarticulate power, though 'availed of' by explicit power—the Emperor and his court): sorcery is known to a wide group, but actually practised by the 'demi-monde'.\textsuperscript{43} The 'witch'\textsuperscript{44} is seen as the special creation of the 'more stable and defined . . . formidable united front' power structure of the sixth century\textsuperscript{45} expecting failure in official roles.\textsuperscript{46} In a sense, evidence of Ausonius', Classical Quarterly, 11(1961)239-49 and social mobility would have threatened the separate identity of groups within Roman society of the day. It is perhaps incorrect of Brown (p.134) to give the impression that the world of the professors was uniformly stable, well-oriented, prosperous: cf. Hopkins, p.239 n.3 and pp.244ff., and A. H. M. Jones, The Later Roman Empire (Oxford, 1964), II, ch.24 esp. pp.1000-02. In fact, the professores and palatini might be seen as equally aspirant and competitive or factious, and thus situated in an environment equally productive of the witchcraft accusation. Yet Ammianus' evidence does not indicate this.

\textsuperscript{38} Purity and Danger, p.102.
\textsuperscript{39} Marwick, pp.247-51.
\textsuperscript{40} Purity and Danger 102.
\textsuperscript{41} Brown, pp.128-29.
\textsuperscript{42} Purity and Danger 109.
\textsuperscript{43} Brown, pp.129-30.
\textsuperscript{44} On the significance of Brown's distinction between 'witch' and 'sorcerer', I have benefited from the work of a student of mine, Mrs Jane Foulcher.
\textsuperscript{45} Brown, pp.140, 130-31.
\textsuperscript{46} Brown, p.141 'Accusations of sorcery now take us into entirely Christian circles: bishops were implicated. . . .'
later Roman society is weakly structured and characterised by a Somali-like separation between the source of spiritual power (sorcerer, holy man) and the wielders of actual power (although, in the case of the Emperor, one might ask whether he wields actual power, in a direct, military sense, or whether he is a kind of ‘priest’). Again, Mary Douglas’ ‘inarticulate’ and ‘articulate’ areas of society do not provide a necessary warrant for Brown’s ‘two systems of power’ even if we ignore the apparent paradox that articulate/inarticulate power systems are relative, not absolute: the ‘inarticulate system’ represented by the senators is, in fact, from another viewpoint ‘so stable, well-oriented a world.’ In other words, the senators are the holders of inarticulate power in the eyes of the palatini (to make explicit categories referred to in Brown’s article) and vice-versa. As such, a two-way exchange of sorcery accusations should be expected, far more clearly than Brown (or possibly Ammianus’ evidence) will allow.

There is also, I think, a difference of understanding on the part of Brown and Douglas concerning the concept of ‘interstitial’ or ‘interstructural’ roles. For Mary Douglas they represent weak points in the social structure or areas of failed authority. For Brown to claim that senators fit into this area (and he does if we follow the model of *Purity and Danger* because the witchcraft accusation (for Brown levelled by the parvenu against the senator) is (according to the model) a ‘demand that ambiguity be reduced’) is patently improbable as senators are part of an older, stable, well-structured world into which the palatini are ‘legitimate intruders’ ‘pressing upwards against this rigid barrier’, and ought, in turn, to attract witchcraft accusations, seen as a ‘demand that ambiguity be reduced’.

48. Ibid.
51. Though Matthews ch.1 suggests the ‘informality’ of senatorial power (by whose standards?).
52. Brown, p.126; Alfoldi p.68, Funke p.175; n.30 above.
54. *Purity and Danger*, p.103.
55. Brown, p.129.
56. The incongruous social equivalence of senatorial aristocracy and ‘demi-monde’ is further stressed in Brown’s work on iconoclasm, where the sorcery accusation against fourth-century senators is equated with imperial iconoclastic decrees in the time of Leo III and Constantine V against the Holy Men. The rise of iconoclasm (episcopal, imperial, anti-monastic) is a symbol of the rise of the liturgical state: it is the Emperor and the Empire as a new Israel that should lead and administer laws for the believer, not the Holy Man. ‘The sorcery accusations of that period (fourth century) were a way of ferreting out and destroying hard nuclei of such inarticulate, un-vested power. It is the same with the Holy Men of the reigns of Leo III and especially Constantine V’ (who persecuted them—Brown, *English Historical Review*
Brown's use of the *Purity and Danger* model confuses the model's identification between witch/sorcerer and enemy of structure rising up from 'unstructure', for in Brown's eyes the enemy of 'structure' is not the witch-sorcerer, whereas in Mary Douglas it is.

These remarks are intended to suggest that there is nothing either systematic or consistent about Brown's use of Mary Douglas, or his apparent departures from her suggestions. This impression is confirmed by Mary Douglas' own apparent failure to grasp exactly what Brown is driving at. The methodological problem at this level is complicated by the fact that Mary Douglas herself has progressively refined her functionalist model of witchcraft. Her introduction to *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations* introduces substantial qualifications into the suggestions in *Purity and Danger*, such as, for example, the importance of internal/external magic or the congruence of weak, competitive power structures and one kind of witchcraft available to all equally. *Accusations* offers some broad classifications of witch beliefs and announces a tentative sociology relating the intensity of human relations and the extent of role ascription to the currency of witchcraft beliefs. This formulation offers even less warrant for Brown's interpretation than *Purity and Danger*. The tentative sociology advanced in *Accusations* is presented in a far more comprehensive form in *Natural Symbols*. Using the terms of reference elaborated in *Natural Symbols* (and which we have no space here to adumbrate), it might be possible to strengthen the methodological substratum for Brown's article, and at the same time to make important corrections to some of his assumptions concerning the early Middle Ages.

On Brown's evidence, accordingly, we may surmise that the world of the professors is increasingly characterised by 'small group' features as uncertainty threatens the efficacy of their established power. The world of the *comitatus* displays similar features, as does that of the fluid mediator class, and witchcraft or sorcery fears and accusations are found in all. Indeed, the very weakening of the accepted system of what Brown calls 'articulate'

---

88(1973)31). The Holy Men and the icons were foci of a totally different form of un-vested, inarticulate power. They were not blessed by anybody. Brown here develops a point hinted at in the Sorcery article: the sorcerer and the Holy Man derive from the same social class (or structural niche?), though one resorts to each in different situations, with different motives (*EHR* pp.32-33). As expounded by Henry ('What was the Iconoclastic Controversy about?', *Church History* 45(1976)16-31), the iconoclast controversy becomes a struggle between ritualism and anti-ritualism, loose bodily control, much humanity and bodily symbolism on the one hand, tight bodily control, little bodily symbolism on the other.

power, may be seen as a sign of society's general descent from 'high classification' features to 'small group' features. Subsequently, we may further surmise, and again on Brown's evidence, the 'small group' characteristics of the late Roman world are gradually replaced by the progressively Christianised 'strong-grid-strong-group' pattern of high classification. The Christian world is 'a world where overt bonds are far more rigid'; 'here the public system of rights and duties equips each man with a full identity, prescribing for him what and when he eats, how he grooms his hair, how he is buried or born . . . the person whose soul is in revolt is regarded as abnormal and needing special ritual curing'. In Christian popular opinion, the sorcerer could no longer be tolerated in the community on the condition that he recanted his art: for he was now considered to have abandoned his identity; he had denied his Christian baptism. 'By the 6th century, the image of the divine world had become exceedingly stable. Angels were the courtiers and bureaucrats of a remote Heavenly Emperor, and the saints, the patroni, the 'protectors', whose efficacious interventions at court channelled the benefits of a just autocrat to individuals and localities. In the late 6th and early 7th century, sorcery is more often punished by the direct intervention of these divine governors: the sorcerer receives short shrift, as a traitor from a well-regimented society'.

Brown thus locates the stereotype of the witch in the changing social structure of the later Roman Empire and the early Middle Ages. In a manner that may suggest to us Mary Douglas' 'high classification model', he introduces 'the witch in the full sense, a person who either is born with or achieves an inherent character of evil', a servant of Satan bound to the devil by compact, a symbol 'at the end of our period' of the strong categorising and preoccupation with external boundaries characteristic of strong grid and group societies, in the later Roman case, Christianity: the witch, once isolated, does not remain within society and its ideology, but is ostracized,
excluded.  Witchcraft in the high classification, or early medieval, society, is not (argues Brown, implicitly), an indicator of grave social tensions within the group as it was in the fourth century; it is a vanquished phenomenon and if we meet the ethnographical picture of witchcraft, as in the barbarian lawcodes, then the witches are a distant remnant of a pre-Roman tribal past: such sorcery accusations as we find in early medieval Christian society (for example, Gregory of Tours, Evagrius), are survivals of late antique 'learned' sorcery in a new social and cosmological context which transforms it into a cult of drop-outs, insiders who, by pact and perfidy, become rank outsiders.

I hope, in this summary and partial re-statement of the main ideas of Brown's article, not to have done too much injustice to the author's intentions (unclear as they sometimes are). The article is marked by all that profound historical insight, flair for language, and stimulating intuitive understanding which make Brown's writings among the very best examples of modern historical scholarship. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that the thesis of the article is neither fully articulated in anthropological terms, nor fully substantiated in historical terms. The use of anthropological models has imposed a confusing straightjacket on Brown's interpretation of historical events: certain possibilities opened up by the anthropological model are not taken up and a suspicion is aroused that the model has resulted in a partial and selective use of the historical evidence. However, it is not simply at this level that I wish to criticise the article.

The major failing of Brown's thesis, from the point of view of a medievalist, is simply that it makes impossible any real insight into the early barbarian social world. The equation between the 'high-classification' mentality of the Christian clergy and the social world of the early medieval villager, which Brown implicitly advances, not only does violence to the evidence of the early barbarian lawcodes (which Brown strangely ignores as a source of village tensions), but falsifies the circumstances of early medieval social and political experimentation. I do not think it can be maintained, on evidence that I can neither present nor discuss in the present context, that sorcery/witchcraft did become marginal in early medieval Europe as a result of the impact of Christianity, nor that articulate and inarticulate power came into phase, nor that Christianity embraced all elements in society, nor that sorcery and witchcraft are vestigial remnants of the pre-detribalised Germanic state in early medieval Europe. On the contrary,

67. Brown 140.
68. Brown 140-41, the only place Brown mentions the lawcodes of the northern barbarians.
69. Brown, pp.131, 141.
70. Cf. Natural Symbols, 87 'the only enemy is the rank outsider'.
71. See n.5 above.
early medieval society, like Roman society in the fourth century, is fraught with social change and tension.

In the early Middle Ages, this tension must be associated with migration and settlement in hostile territory: ‘tribal bonds have dissolved, kindreds have become too diffuse to serve as real security and the political situation is somewhat in flux’, to quote an eminent New Zealand medievalist.72 Munz has described the centuries between antiquity and full feudalism as ‘masked by the dissolution of the primitive bonds and the haphazard formation of largish warrior hordes under the terror leadership of brutal warlords to whom nothing was sacred even if they made use of Christian ritual to put a charismatic wig on the brigand’s dagger’.73 Friction and tension at the level of court, lordship and village is endemic in early medieval society, between the new episcopal and clerical order, with its pronounced Roman and senatorial background, and the predominantly Germanic court and military echelons, between villagers and priests, counts and bishops, bishops and other bishops, bishops and the stooges or pimps of the court, between those caught in the patronage circles of one queen, prince or faction, and those caught in the tentacles of rival networks, between Roman slaves and Germanic masters, between rapacious merchants and needy villagers, and so on:74 the pages of Gregory of Tours are ample witness to tension and instability. Indeed, if we make anything of the strict segregation between holders of secular power and wielders of religious authority75 that characterises early medieval Christian and Somali society,76 then we must define early medieval society as a weak authority structure: ‘we can expect either that formal authority is weak or ill-defined or that, for one reason or another, the political structure has been neutralised so that the powers of blessing cannot emanate from its key-points’.77 In other words, there is just as much scope for an interpretation of the social significance of witchcraft and sorcery in terms of out-of-phase two power systems (articulate/inarticulate), or in terms of the prevalence of small group social characteristics in the early medieval period as in the fourth century A.D. The thesis that witchcraft and sorcery are not dynamically or sociologically

74. One needs only to point to the troubled history of Ostrogothic Italy between the subversion and assassination of Boethius and the final Pyrrhic triumph of Justinian’s general Narses to illustrate this sentence.
75. Cf. notes 27 and 56 above.
77. Ibid.
indicative in the early medieval period, is the consequence not only of a mis-
reading of the historical record, but of a failure to press anthropological
insights and analogies sufficiently far.

If I may conclude by pressing anthropological insights a little further, it
would seem that the strong social patterning imposed on the late Roman
world by Christianity, did not succeed in dispersing the causes of small
group patterning according to the model proposed in *Natural Symbols*. The
late Roman and early medieval body politic ‘tends to have a clear external
boundary, and a confused internal state in which envy and favouritism
flourish and continually confound the proper expectations of members . . .
the (witchcraft) accusation is a righteous demand for conformity. In a com-
munity in which overt conflict cannot be contained, witchcraft fears are
used to justify expulsion and fission. These are communities in which
authority has very weak resources’ (Mary Douglas).78 ‘By and large
witchcraft beliefs are likely to flourish in small enclosed groups, where
movement in and out is restricted, when interaction is unavoidably close,
and where roles are undefined or so defined that they are impossible to per-
form’ (Mary Douglas).79 ‘Where social interaction is intense and ill-defined,
there we may expect to find witchcraft beliefs. Where human relations are
sparse and diffuse, or where roles are very fully ascribed, we would not
expect to find witchcraft beliefs’.80 Our model is that in which the witch is
an internal enemy81 rather than an external one.82

Here we must probably draw a distinction between the society of early
medieval Europe83 and that of the developed feudal Middle Ages: ‘Accusa-
tions clustered in areas of ambiguous social relations. Where roles were buf-
fered by unequal power, wealth, or other forms of social distance,
witchcraft accusations were not made; they appeared where tensions
between neighbouring rivals could not otherwise be resolved’ (Mary
Douglas).84 Hence in feudal Europe, where accumulated wealth divided
lord and serf we can expect to find little trace of witch-beliefs that involved
the consciousness of aristocrats and upper clergy, except in the sense of the
witch as an external enemy strongly externalised and rejected in accordance
with Mary Douglas’ strong grid pattern.85 Even so, amongst oppressed
social groups in high feudal times, small group characteristics would be

81. *Accusations* xxvii.
82. *Accusations* xxvi.
84. *Accusations* xvii.
displayed and it is noteworthy that a crisis such as that into which Flanders was plunged in 1127 with the murder of Count Charles the Good, a classic instance of role confusion, was accompanied by sorcery accusations and strongly exorcist movements, including the disembowelling of sorcerers, possibly in connection with a witch-belief such as we find among the Azande.86 In earlier medieval Europe, we can suppose, clear social stratifications with an appropriately clear cosmology had not yet developed. The very existence of the barbarian lawcodes indicates the confusion of internal roles and boundaries in the early Germanic kingdoms.87 Wealth, privilege and power are largely, in Brown's terms, 'inarticulate' because an articulate system of power holding and transfer had not been developed. The Holy Man, by denying the validity of ordinary village roles and categories failed to offer late antique and early medieval man in the western Romano-German regions a sense of role, identity and duty that alone could have led to the disappearance of the sorcerer.88

As a consequence—and here I have to draw on research into the early barbarian lawcodes that it is not possible to present in this context—witchcraft fears and accusations seem to have prevailed generally, and in particular for groups or classes least firmly attached to the status and value system of the early medieval world (for example, women, serfs and other dependent groups).89 Women's power in this world was largely indirect and depended upon the force of their personality and sexual attraction, and such property as was vested in them in accordance with prevailing laws. Whether or not magical arts were a typical resort of those in such a social situation, witchcraft accusations certainly seem to have functioned as a means by which men were able to extend their own control over women and to explain success and failure (in terms of property acquisition?) on the part of their peers. In a situation where power and success are attained in ways that do not yet accord with any clear level of normal expectation (Brown's articulate/inarticulate), witchcraft is seen as a socially condemned source of power/success; it functions as a theodicy of evil and misfortune in a

89. On women see Douglas Natural Symbols, p.117, and the studies by Joanne McNamara and Suzanne Wemple in Feminist Studies 1(1973)126-41 and in S. Mosher Stuard (ed.), Women in Medieval Society, (Philadelphia, 1976), pp.95-124. Careful study of Gregory of Tours and the Lombard law codes (cf. n.5 above) confirms the impression that witchcraft was in large part the resort of women (of all classes) because of their relatively oppressed position in the social structure. Males could, and did, take more direct action to gain their ends.
strongly competitive society without clear lines of authority or an accepted pattern of power and success. Such a society, I feel, prevailed well into the medieval era. Consequently, the thesis advanced by Peter Brown in the article I have been discussing must, at least as far as its relevance to early medieval society is concerned, be revised.

90. See Krige in Marwick, pp.237ff. A curious illustration of the late survival of early medieval legal status and authority confusion is the fact that as late as 933 A.D., in the city of Narbonne, Gothic, Roman and Salic Law were recognised by judges in lawsuits brought before the public assembly. The principle of personality of the law kept alive the leges Visigothorum (or the Breviarium Alarici, the text is not explicit), Salic law and one or another of the Vulgar Roman lawcodes. (M. Thévenin, Textes relatifs aux institutions privées et publiques aux époques mérovingienne et carolingienne, Paris, Coll. de Textes pour servir à l'étude et à l'enseignement de l'histoire, 1887, pp.188-90, trans. R. S. Lopez, The Tenth Century, N.Y., 1959, pp.45-46.)

* * *

I would like to thank my students, in particular Mr Chris Kenna, and my Research Assistant, Ms Sharon Davidson, for much stimulating help on the anthropological aspects of this article.