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## 7 Bizarre Witch Trial Tests

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Practicing black magic was once considered a heinous crime on par with rape and murder. The 18th century B.C. Code of Hammurabi contained provisions against sorcery, and many medieval legal systems listed specific parameters for identifying, trying and even executing suspected witches and warlocks. Since finding proof of devilry was no ordinary task, would-be witch-hunters often resorted to some particularly outlandish experiments in their quest to convict accused necromancers. From barbaric tortures and occult dessert dishes to unwinnable trials by ordeal, find out more about seven unusual tests once used as evidence of supernatural misconduct.



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### 1. Swimming Test

As part of the infamous “swimming test,” accused witches were dragged to the nearest body of water, stripped to their undergarments, bound and then tossed in to to see if they would sink or float. Since witches were believed to have spurned the sacrament of baptism, it was thought that the water would reject their body and prevent them from submerging. According to this logic, an innocent person would sink like a stone, but a witch would simply bob on the surface. The victim typically had a rope tied around their waist so they could be pulled from the water if they sank, but it wasn’t unusual for accidental drowning deaths to occur.

Witch swimming derived from the “trial by water,” an ancient practice where suspected criminals and sorcerers were thrown into rushing rivers to allow a higher power to decide their fate. This custom was

banned in many European counties in the Middle Ages, only to reemerge in the 17th century as a witch experiment, and it persisted in some locales well into the 18th century. For example, in 1710, the swimming test was used as evidence against a Hungarian woman named Dorko Boda, who was later beaten and burned at the stake as a witch.

## **2. Prayer Test**

Medieval wisdom held that witches were incapable of speaking scripture aloud, so accused sorcerers were made to recite selections from the Bible—usually the Lord’s Prayer—without making mistakes or omissions. While it may have simply been a sign that the suspected witch was illiterate or nervous, any errors were viewed as proof that the speaker was in league with the devil. This twisted test of public speaking ability was commonly used as hard evidence in witch trials. In 1712, it was applied in the case Jane Wenham, an accused witch who supposedly struggled to speak the words “forgive us our trespasses” and “lead us not into temptation” during her interrogation. Still, even a successful prayer test didn’t guarantee an acquittal. During the Salem Witch Trials, the accused sorcerer George Burroughs flawlessly recited the prayer from the gallows just before his execution. The performance was dismissed as a devil’s trick, and the hanging proceeded as planned.

## **3. Touch Test**

The touch test worked on the idea that victims of sorcery would have a special reaction to physical contact with their evildoer. In cases where a possessed person fell into spells or fits, the suspected witch would be brought into the room and asked to lay a hand on them. A non-reaction signaled innocence, but if the victim came out of their fit, it was seen as proof that the suspect had placed them under a spell.

Touch tests played a famous part in the 1662 trial of Rose Cullender and Amy Denny, two elderly English women charged with bewitching a pair of young girls. The children had been suffering from fits that left their fists clenched so tightly that even a strong man could not pry their fingers apart, but early tests showed they easily opened whenever Cullender or Denny touched them. To ensure the reaction was genuine, judges had the children blindfolded and touched by other members of the court. The girls unclenched their fists anyway, which suggested they were faking, but even this was not enough to prove the women’s innocence. Cullender and Denny were both later hanged as witches.

## **4. Witch Cakes**

A bizarre form of counter-magic, the witch cake was a supernatural dessert used to identify suspected evildoers. In cases of mysterious illness or possession, witch-hunters would take a sample of the victim’s urine, mix it with rye-meal and ashes and bake it into a cake. This stomach-turning concoction was then fed to a dog—the “familiar,” or animal helpers, of witches—in the hope that the beast would fall under its spell and reveal the name of the guilty sorcerer. During the hysteria that preceded the Salem Witch Trials, the slave Tituba famously helped prepare a witch cake to identify the person responsible for bewitching young Betty Parris and others. The brew failed to work, and Tituba’s supposed knowledge of spells and folk remedies was later used as evidence against her when she was accused of being a witch.

## **5. Witch’s Marks**

Witch-hunters often had their suspects stripped and publically examined for signs of an unsightly blemish that witches were said to receive upon making their pact with Satan. This “Devil’s Mark” could supposedly change shape and color, and was believed to be numb and insensitive to pain. Prosecutors might also search for the “witches’ teat,” an extra nipple allegedly used to suckle the witch’s helper animals. In both cases, it was easy for even the most minor physical imperfections to be labeled as the

work of the devil himself. Moles, scars, birthmarks, sores, supernumerary nipples and tattoos could all qualify, so examiners rarely came up empty-handed. In the midst of witch hunts, desperate villagers would sometimes even burn or cut off any offending marks on their bodies, only to have their wounds labeled as proof of a covenant with

## **6. Pricking and Scratching Tests**

If witch-hunters struggled to find obvious evidence of “witch’s marks” on a suspect’s body, they might resort to the ghastly practice of “pricking” as a means of sussing it out. Witch-hunting books and instructional pamphlets noted that the marks were insensitive to pain and couldn’t bleed, so examiners used specially designed needles to repeatedly stab and prick at the accused person’s flesh until they discovered a spot that produced the desired results. In England and Scotland, the torture was eventually performed by well-paid professional “prickers,” many of whom were actually con men who used dulled needlepoints to identify fake witch’s marks.

Along with pricking, the unfortunate suspect might also be subjected to “scratching” by their supposed victims. This test was based on the notion that possessed people found relief by scratching the person responsible with their fingernails until they drew blood. If their symptoms improved after clawing at the accused’s skin, it was seen as partial evidence of guilt.

## **7. Incantations**

Also known as “charging,” this test involved forcing the accused witch to verbally order the devil to let the possessed victim come out of their fit or trance. Other people would also utter the words to act as a “control,” and judges would then gauge whether the statements had any effect on the victim’s condition. Charges were famously used in the 16th century witch trial of Alice Samuel and her husband and daughter, who were accused of bewitching five girls from the wealthy Throckmorton family. During the proceedings, judges forced the Samuels to demand that the devil release the girls from their spell by stating, “As I am a witch...so I charge the devil to let Mistress Throckmorton come out of her fit at this present.” When the possessed girls immediately recovered, the Samuels were found guilty and hanged as witches.