

These two recent studies testify to the significant vitality of our contemporary interest in medieval and early-modern Christian witchcraft and demonology. These volumes represent the two most frequent approaches to this complex thematic. On the one hand, Dunand presents a historical examination of a specific case of witch craze in late-fifteenth-century France through a detailed analysis of the social and cultural foundations that led to the execution of at least thirteen citizens of the valley of Chamonix. Dunand also transcribes some of the most fascinating documents related to these disturbing events. Di Caccia, on the other hand, publishes an accurate edition of De cognitionibus quas habent daemones liber unus (1624), one of Federico Borromeo’s treatises on demonology, which represents a sophisticated reinterpretation of some of the key concepts of Renaissance views of demonic knowledge. Borromeo’s book is a late representative of a philosophical and theological genre that dominated fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe. Borromeo’s daring and fascinating conclusions about the limits of demonic knowledge can be understood only if read as a reaction to a set of received ideas that had remained unchallenged for several decades.

As Dunand points out in the introduction to her volume dedicated to a series of executions between 1458 and 1462 in the valley of Chamonix, it is rare to find documents related to a “crisis of witchcraft in the diocese of Geneva,” and this is why she was led to investigate the archives in High-Savoy and other close-by locations, with unquestionably interesting results (p. 3). Dunand underscores that an understanding of this historical event requires consideration of the contemporary political tensions in that region. In the first chapter the author offers a historical survey of the historical conditions and geographical isolation that led to the transformation of the valley of Chamonix into an independent community at the end of the thirteenth century. Although the valley fell under the jurisdiction of a priory, its inhabitants resisted this political arrangement. In Dunand’s words, the “wave of witchcraft” between 1458 and 1462 reflected a deep fracture between the citizens of the valley of Chamonix and their rulers (p. 25), who tried to limit political rights—first, in criminal justice, which often had unclear jurisdiction (p. 30). The prior, Guillaume de Ravoire, who displayed morally questionable conduct, tried to transfer all political decisions to members of his family, triggering anger in the valley (p. 38). Particularly interesting is the second part of the volume, which reproduces a series of legal documents connected to the witch hunt of those years, such as the death sentences of the victims of the inquisition’s persecution.
Francesco di Caccia’s volume is first and foremost a critical edition and Italian translation of Borromeo’s little-known Latin treatise. In his brief introduction, di Caccia makes it clear that he primarily intends to highlight the genesis and the main points of interest of this seventeenth-century volume. According to di Caccia, Borromeo decided to compose a treatise on the complex topic of demonic knowledge while writing a text on ecstatic and delusional women (De ecstatīs mulieribus et illusionibus, 1616). Considering how easily he had uncovered the demons’ deceptions against feeble-minded women, Borromeo came to the conclusion that demons’ intelligence was limited in actuality (p. 15). Although demons have all the ontological characteristics of any angelic being, in Borromeo’s view God must have somehow blurred their rational cognition to thwart their attacks against human beings. In his edition, di Caccia faithfully transcribes Borromeo’s corrections and additional remarks to the printed text. Borromeo constructs his texts according to the rhetorical format of a Thomist tract. Particularly fascinating is, for example, chapter XIII, in which Borromeo tries to define the concrete strategies that God may use to obfuscate the demons’ knowledge. What makes this section fascinating is that Borromeo mentions the same techniques that are usually attributed to demons in their manipulation of human senses (pp. 81–82, 198–99). In Borromeo’s view, God does not blind demons but rather blurs or confuses their sight by placing misleading objects before their eyes or by suspending their cognitive faculties for a certain period of time. A tenet of Renaissance demonology is indeed the belief that demons are capable of blinding human beings’ sight at least partially by shifting particles of their memory (the so-called phantasmata) in front of their eyes. A unique aspect of Borromeo’s treatise is that he not only alludes to the usual sources (Church Fathers, Pseudo-Dionysius, and so forth) but also attacks Girolamo Cardano’s view of demonic knowledge (see, for instance, chapter XIV), although Borromeo recognizes that Cardano speaks as a scientist (a natural philosopher) and not a Christian theologian. Unlike most sixteenth- and seventeenth-century treatises on demonology, Borromeo’s work stands out for its sobriety and emphasis on the “objective” limits of the demons’ powers, primarily due to their sinfulness and God’s active intervention. Even the witches’ night gatherings with their demons are depicted in Borromeo’s book as disappointing parties in which, for example, the food offered to the witches looks delicious but has an unpleasant taste, because God does not allow the fallen angels to accomplish their malevolent intents (chapter XXVIII). Borromeo’s relatively short treatise is of great relevance for a better understanding of the late phase of early-modern demonology.

The University of Chicago


Nowadays it is hard to remember the excitement provoked in their time by the pioneering researches of French historians like Philippe Ariès, Michel Vovelle, François Lebrun, and Pierre Chaunu on attitudes—and the practices to which they