

# 'Pagan,' a Blurred Concept: 'Pagan' Practices in Burchard of Worms' *Corrector sive Medicus*

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## Abstract

This piece explores the concept of “pagan” and the idea of “pagan survivals” in Burchard of Worms' *Corrector sive medicus*. The *Corrector sive medicus*, also known as *Corrector Burchardi* or *Da poenitentia* was written between the year 1000 and 1025 by Burchard, bishop of Worms, born around the year 965. The *Corrector* is a penitential manual, the 19th chapter of the *Decretum*, which recommended penance for those who performed unchristian acts such as murder, adultery, magical practices and others. This article discusses the blurry concept of “pagan” as an initial attempt to shed light on Burchard's understanding of magic. This article discussed the methodological problems of the idea of “pagan survivals” and “popular beliefs” and argues that trying to find the archaic origins of certain beliefs is not particularly useful in uncovering the way medieval writers thought about and saw them.

Keywords: Pagan, pagan survivals, *ars magica*, penance, Middle Ages

## Introduction

One of the conundrums historians of religion must often grapple with is the boundary between that which is considered orthodox and that which is considered heterodox, or sometimes heretical. Even in cases where it is a known fact that certain ideas are not part of orthodoxy, different concepts often confound. Most historians would probably agree that practices that normally fall under umbrella concepts such as pagan, magic, and popular beliefs are not part of orthodox Christianity. But medieval belief and the way belief works in medieval sources is naturally blurry.<sup>1</sup> Recent scholarship has been working on exploring the boundaries between heresy and orthodoxy as well as different heresies and different orthodoxies.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, concepts can be blurry – most recently Ronald Hutton talked about how the boundaries of the concept of “pagan survival” were always going to be blurred.<sup>3</sup> The boundaries of what “pagan” means have also been rather blurry: according to Bernadette Filotas “paganism is a notoriously amorphous notion. It has no content in itself, and does not

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<sup>1</sup> See: John Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe* (London: New York: Hodder Arnold, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> See other essay in this publication as well as Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane and Anne Elisabeth Lester, eds., *Between Orders and Heresy: Rethinking Medieval Religious Movements* (Toronto Buffalo London: University of Toronto Press, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Ronald Hutton, *Queens of the Wild: Pagan Goddesses In Christian Europe: An Investigation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).

describe a coherent set of beliefs and practices".<sup>4</sup> Whatever meaning the word had, it also changed from the classical period and throughout the Middle Ages.<sup>5</sup>

Early scholarly debates accepted the common assumption that the Middle Ages were, fundamentally, Christian or Catholic. In the nineteenth century, anthropology and folklore became favoured approaches for the study of medieval religious life and thus the "people", or the "folk", became topics of interest to European scholarship. Practices previously dismissed by scholars of the Enlightenment as "superstition" and often overlooked by Catholic scholars were then seen as the true religion of the people.<sup>6</sup> This conception held that the religion of the people was unadulterated by elite clerical culture and was thus non-Christian, or pagan. Consequently, concepts such as "popular" or "folk" beliefs, "superstition" and "pagan" became even more muddled. Scholarly interest in folk traditions in Europe goes back to the work of the Grimm brothers in Germany, first published in the early nineteenth century. In 1835 Jacob Grimm argued the survival of old Teutonic cults, whereas Soldan argued for Greco-Roman antecedents.<sup>7</sup> Equally important in the nineteenth century was the influence of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, first published in 1890. Indeed, many started to interpret all sorts of rituals as derived from ancient forms of fertility magic. Thus, the idea of pagan survivals – that is, pagan cults that persisted through the Middle Ages into the Early Modern period – became popular. Perhaps the most infamous work of this period is that of Margaret Murray, who theorised that witches were members of a secret fertility cult dedicated to the god Dianus which had been preserved since prehistorical times down to the seventeenth century.<sup>8</sup>

From the 1970s onwards, the Murray thesis became largely discredited, and this allowed scholars to view the source material from a different perspective. Keith Thomas, who applied anthropology to the analysis of European witchcraft, criticised Murray's theory whilst approaching European witchcraft from a social history perspective and viewing it as a specific type of social structure.<sup>9</sup> In 1972, Jeffrey

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<sup>4</sup> Bernadette Filotas, *Pagan Survivals, Superstitions and Popular Cultures in Early Medieval Pastoral Literature*, Studies and Texts 151 (Toronto (Canada): Pontifical institute of medieval studies, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Austin Markus, 'Gregory the Great's Pagans', in *Belief and Culture in the Middle Ages: Studies Presented to Henry Mayr-Harting*, ed. Richard Gameson and Henrietta Leyser (Oxford: Oxford university press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> In Germany in particular the interest in the *Volkskunde* heightens and the works of intellectuals such as the Brothers Grimm became extremely influential. See: Burke, *Popular culture in Early modern Europe*. According to Burke, the idea of a "religion of the people" was first suggested by Ludwig Achim von Arnim in Lenz, *Das Volkserlebnis bei L. A. von Arnim*, 123 and was developed by Chateaubriand, who used the term *dévotions populaires* in his *Génie du Christianisme*.

<sup>7</sup> Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*; Soldan, *Geschichte der Hexenprozesse*.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Murray, *The witch-cult in Western Europe*.

<sup>9</sup> Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971).

Burton Russell continued to criticise Murray, whilst recognising that her work advanced valid anthropological ideas, such as the connection between religion, low magic and pagan folk customs.<sup>10</sup> Even though Murray's theory of direct pagan survivals had been refuted, questions about how actually "Christian" the Middle Ages were continued. Jean Delumeau was one of the first scholars to argue that medieval people were not thoroughly Christianised.<sup>11</sup> Other early modernists such as Keith Thomas, Carlo Ginzburg, and Gerald Strauss soon followed.<sup>12</sup>

A different model, but which is often used to analyse the same kinds of practices was the two-culture model. This model posited that there were two distinct cultures: that of the clerical and bookish and that of the masses of uneducated laypeople, who believed in popular or folk beliefs.<sup>13</sup> That is, the beliefs of the laity and the beliefs of the Church were not the same and were frequently in conflict or at least in tension. The primary texts used to produce these scholarly works, however, consisted mainly of *exempla* and inquisitorial records and, as such, could only reveal the views of a small clerical elite.<sup>14</sup> According to this school, even though these sources were mostly formulaic, they still preserved an authentic essence, untouched by clerical culture. From thence, certain historians extrapolated and started to suggest that certain practices remained essentially unchanged from pre-Christian Europe to the late Middle Ages.<sup>15</sup> Later scholarship, on the other hand, has shown that several forbidden practices were not necessarily restricted to a rural environment or to the lower classes. Eamon Duffy, for instance, argued that, in pre-Reformation England, there was no major divide between the religion of the masses, the religion of the secular elite and the religion of the clergy.<sup>16</sup> While others have argued that this strict division between lay and clerical

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<sup>10</sup> Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 37.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Delumeau, *Le catholicisme entre Luther et Voltaire*, (Paris: Nouvelle Cléo, 1971).

<sup>12</sup> Thomas, *Religion*; Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980); Gerald Strauss, *Luther's House of Learning; Indoctrination of the Young in the German Reformation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978). For an overview of this discussion see: John van Engen, "The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem", *The American Historical Review*, 519-552 and, for the Early Modern period, Natalie Z. Davis, "From 'Popular Religion' to Religious Cultures", in *Reformation Europe: a guide to research* (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1982).

<sup>13</sup> Even though this notion had started with the Germanic *Volk* scholarship mentioned above, in the second half of the twentieth century it was likely propagated by scholars such as Jacques Le Goff, in his *Pour un autre moyen age* and Schmitt, *The Holy Greyhound: Guinefort, Healer of Children since the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 11-35 and Schmitt, "'Jeunes' et danse des chevaux de bois: Le folklore méridional dans la littérature des 'exempla' (XIIIe - XIVe siècles)", in *Religion Populaire en Languedoc* (Toulouse: E. Privat, 1976).

<sup>14</sup> Schmitt's sources for *The Holy Greyhound* were primarily *exempla* whereas inquisitorial records were the main sources for Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* and for Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou*. Also see: Schmitt, "'Jeunes'", 127-158.

<sup>15</sup> See Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1990) and for a more recent and skeptical discussion see Ronald Hutton, *Pagan Britain* (New Haven (Conn.): Yale University Press, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Eamon Duffy, *The stripping of the altars: traditional religion in England c. 1400-c.1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

culture does not take into account the lived experience of the clergy, who had things in common with their parishioners and who also exchanged ideas and experiences with them.<sup>17</sup> Although critics of the twofold culture model have often dismissed it as simplistic and monolithic, the proponents themselves have indeed brought attention to how medieval belief was complex and nuanced.<sup>18</sup>

I deemed this brief digression into historiography necessary not because it is novel – in fact, many historians have examined these concepts in greater detail – but because it is rich and still ongoing.<sup>19</sup> It is also helpful to demarcate how the categories “popular belief” and “pagan survivals” were discussed by modern scholars, in order to understand how “paganism” and “magic” were understood by medieval scholars. One encounters several problems when dealing with the concept of “pagan”. Firstly, it is very tempting to define the notion of paganism as opposed to that of “Christian”, but the fact that certain practices were seen as non-Christian does not mean that they were pagan in origin or that, if they were, by the time they were put on paper, they had not been imbued with Christian meaning.<sup>20</sup> The word as it appears in the sources does not imply a rejection of Christianity: in fact, it referred to people who thought of themselves as Christian and who developed genuine Christian piety that flourished alongside practices labelled by Church writers as pagan.<sup>21</sup> Secondly, there is the temptation to search over vast areas and back to a remote past in order to find similar morphological elements in the rituals or practices described by medieval authors. However, as Carl Watkins advised, it is more useful for us historians to look at these motifs as an organic whole in order to uncover their functionality and how they were understood by members of the community.<sup>22</sup> Then

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<sup>17</sup> See Engen, “The Christian Middle Ages” and Leonard Boyle, “Popular piety in the Middle Ages: what is popular?”, *Florilegium* 4 (1982): 184-193.

<sup>18</sup> Scholars of the two-culture model did not present it as a rigid paradigm, Le Goff, Schmitt, Gurevich and others pointed out elements of reciprocity and diversity: Schmitt, “Religion, folklore and society in the Medieval West”, in Barbara H. Rosenwein and Lester K. Little *Debating the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 376-387.

<sup>19</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, ‘From “Popular Religion” to Religious Cultures’, in *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research* (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1982); Carl Watkins, “‘Folklore’ and ‘Popular Religion’ in Britain during the Middle Ages”, *Folklore* 115, no. 2 (September 2004): 140-50; and for a very thorough overview see Peter Biller, ‘Popular Religion in the Central and Later Middle Ages’, in *Companion to Historiography*, ed. Michael Bentley, 1. publ. in paperback, World Reference (London: Routledge, 2002). Most recently see Hutton, *Queens of the Wild*.

<sup>20</sup> John Van Engen, ‘The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem’, *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 3 (June 1986): 519, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1869130>; Watkins, “‘Folklore’ and ‘Popular Religion’ in Britain during the Middle Ages”; Carl Watkins, ‘Inventing Pagans’, in *History and the Supernatural in Medieval England* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Filotas, *Pagan Survivals, Superstitions and Popular Cultures in Early Medieval Pastoral Literature*, 16. Felice Lifshitz has the interesting argument that, in the early Middle Ages, accusations of paganism were disagreements over what it meant to be a Christian rather than pagan survivals. Felice Lifshitz, *The Norman Conquest of Pious Neustria: Historiographic Discourse and Sainly Relics, 684-1090*, Studies and Texts 122 (Toronto, Ont., Canada: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1995).

<sup>22</sup> Watkins, “‘Folklore’ and ‘Popular Religion’ in Britain during the Middle Ages’: 144.

there is the difficulty that is intrinsic to the nature of the sources. Sources about alleged pagan survivals are too fragmentary - they do, however, exist. Nevertheless, much of it comes from normative sources such as penitential manuals. Penitential texts are comprised mostly of an assemblage of older texts that were seen as authoritative by the author.<sup>23</sup> Old canons were often quoted in new texts and this standard literary practice makes it harder for the historian to demarcate what was being quoted simply out of convention of the literary genre and what was current practice.<sup>24</sup> Not to mention that uncovering the allegedly archaic origins of practices described in the sources is not particularly helpful when trying to understand how these practices were viewed by the medieval writers who wrote them down, which is what I attempt to do here. This piece aims to discuss the implications of the word “pagan” as it was used by Burchard of Worms in his *Corrector sive medicus*.

### *The Corrector sive medicus, or Da poenitentia*

The *Corrector sive medicus*, also known as *Corrector Burchardi* or *Da poenitentia* was written between the year 1000 and 1025 by Burchard, bishop of Worms, born around the year 965.<sup>25</sup> The *Corrector* is a penitential manual, and it is the 19th chapter of the *Decretum*, a book that dealt with various aspects of canon law, synods, eucharist, fasting, and others. Manuscripts used to administer penance were known as penitential manuals, or *libri paenitentiales*, between the 6th and 11th centuries. They differ from manuals for confessors (*summae confessorum*) which became ubiquitous from the first half of the 12th century. Whilst the latter consisted of long treatises that discussed theology and canon law, *libri paenitentiales* were shorter works, most commonly handbooks which contained questions and answers related to sin and penance.<sup>26</sup> These questions were aimed at sinners who needed confession and the answers were the corresponding penance to each transgression. Penitential manuals dealt with a wide variety of

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<sup>23</sup> Greta Austin, *Shaping Church Law around the Year 1000: The Decretum of Burchard of Worms, Church, Faith, and Culture in the Medieval West* (Farnham, Surrey, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009). See also *Burchards Dekret Digital* (<https://www.adwmainz.de/en/projekte/burchards-dekret-digital/current-issues.html>), a project based at the University of Mainz which is currently developing a digital edition of the *Decretum*.

<sup>24</sup> Rob Meens, ‘Thunder over Lyon: Agobard, the Tempestarii and Christianity’, in *Paganism in the Middle Ages: Threat and Fascination*, ed. Carlos G. Steel, John Marenbon, and Werner Verbeke, *Mediaevalia Lovaniensia*, series 1, studia XLIII (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2012): 163. Although certain scholars argue for the practical purpose of penitential manuals and how they must reflect what people were doing, Pierre J. Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials: The Development of a Sexual Code, 550-1150* (University of Toronto Press, 1984), 13; Cyrille Vogel, *Les ‘Libri Paenitentiales’* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1978): 31. Yitzak Hen, on the other hand, argued against the idea of living paganism, even in the Merovingian period, but remarked that fear of paganism persisted amongst the clergy even after practices and beliefs had vanished, see:

<sup>25</sup> Greta Austin, ‘Burchard of Worms’, in *Great Christian Jurists and Legal Collections in the First Millennium*, ed. Philip L. Reynolds, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 458–70.

<sup>26</sup> Payer, “Confession and the study of sex in the Middle Ages”, 3-31.

sins, such as murder, perjury, theft, magical practices, and so forth.

Scholarship has previously discussed the *Decretum's* popularity during the 11th century, and most scholars seem to attribute this popularity to Burchard's thoroughness and the book's functionality since it managed to discuss a variety of themes in a single and fairly compact volume.<sup>27</sup> Greta Austin however, mentions not only the functionality of Burchard's writings, but also the concern about the legitimacy of his sources as well as his attempt at consistency and lack of contradictions.<sup>28</sup> Burchard successfully wrote a book that made sense from beginning to end rather than – as most works up to his point – quote various sources that contradict one another.<sup>29</sup> In order to write the *Decretum*, Burchard and his assistants selected passages from previous works, sometimes simply quoting them directly, and sometimes altering them – although they did not always indicate that they did so.<sup>30</sup> Burchard and his collaborators would sometimes invent texts and attribute them to existing sources, especially if they were considered by them as authoritative.<sup>31</sup> Several scholars have shown that Burchard used other penitentials as sources to write the *Corrector*, notably Regino of Prüm's *Libri duo de synodalibus causis et disciplinis ecclesiasticis*.<sup>32</sup> But while Regino's penitential contains only forty questions, Burchard's *Corrector* has over one hundred and ninety.<sup>33</sup> What is particularly curious about Burchard's work is that some of the material concerning non-Christian beliefs seems to be original.<sup>34</sup> Some historians go so far as to argue that the original passages most likely come from Burchard's observations in his diocese.<sup>35</sup> There is some debate amongst scholars on whether the practices described in penitential literature, including Burchard's material, actually took place.<sup>36</sup> While some scholars argue that most medieval sources regarding superstitions drew so heavily upon older canons that they

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<sup>27</sup> Fournier, "Études Critiques sur le Décret de Burchard de Worms", 41-584; Hoffmann and Pokorny, *Das Dekret des Bischofs Burchard von Worms*; Austin, *Shaping Church Law Around the Year 1000: The Decretum of Burchard of Worms*.

<sup>28</sup> Austin, *Shaping Church Law*.

<sup>29</sup> Filotas, *Pagan Survivals, Superstitions and Popular Cultures in Early Medieval Pastoral Literature*, 55.

<sup>30</sup> Greta Austin, "The Bishop, "Magic" and Women: Episcopal Visitation of the Diocese, Laywomen and the Supernatural, and Clerical Authority in the Central Middle Ages", *Gender & History*, 14 September 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.12732>, 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Kottje, *Die Bussbücher Halitgars von Cambrai und des Hrabanus Maurus: Ihre Überlieferung und ihre Quellen, Beiträge zur Geschichte und Quellenkunde des Mittelalters*; Regino of Prüm, *Reginonis abbatis Prumiensis libri duo de synodalibus causis et disciplinis ecclesiasticis*; Fournier, "Études Critiques," 45. Meens, "The frequency and Nature of Early Medieval Penance".

<sup>33</sup> Körntgen, "Canon Law and the Practice of Penance: Burchard of Worms's Penitential", 110. Austin, *Shaping Church Law*, 231. Maraschi, "There is More than Meets the Eye: Undead, Ghosts and Spirits in the Decretum of Burchard of Worms," 31.

<sup>34</sup> Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe, 600-1200*, 150-151; Hamilton, *The Practice of Penance, 900-1050*, 40. Vogel, "Pratiques superstitieuses au début du XIe siècle d'après le *Corrector sive Medicus* de Burchard, évêque de Worms (965-1025)", 751-761.

<sup>35</sup> Maraschi, "There is More than Meets the Eye", 31.

<sup>36</sup> Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, 152; Smith, *Ordering Women's Lives: Penitentials and Nunnery Rules in the Early Medieval West*.

can have no basis in reality,<sup>37</sup> others defend the idea that the authors of penitential manuals were actively trying to eradicate superstitions and non-Christian customs among their parishioners and that repetitions in the sources should be regarded as evidence of the vitality of the phenomena which they interpret.<sup>38</sup> While it is possible that some of the questions might have described practices and beliefs of laywomen in Burchard's diocese, this notion is often linked to the problematic concept of "pagan survivals" to which Burchard's work is often linked.<sup>39</sup>

Crucially, penance was not merely an expression of top-down control, from the Church and inflicted upon the lay penitent: the act of recommending penance to someone else, in and of itself, also taught members of the Church what should and should not be done and this might have affected their behaviour. This is particularly relevant when talking about the period leading up to the Gregorian Reform.<sup>40</sup> There was a growing concern with creating a clear distinction between holy and unholy, between the pure and the impure. The Church was the earthly manifestation of the Spirit and thus was seen as superior to earthly things. During this time, the Church attempted to achieve certain independence from the power of the state, and this required a clear differentiation between clergy and laity. With the emergence of the reform movement of the eleventh century, as part of a wider move towards separating the Church from the worldly, a new body of literature which highlighted ritual purity was developed.<sup>41</sup> Purity was now even more necessary for the clergy, because there was a new focus on rituals such as the Eucharist, which only a priest could perform.<sup>42</sup> The attempt to establish a more consistent form of orthodoxy becomes particularly relevant during Burchard's lifetime,

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<sup>37</sup> Dieter Harmening, 'Superstitio: Überlieferungs- und theoriegeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur kirchlich-theologischen Aberglaubensliteratur des Mittelalters' (Berlin, BRD, E. Schmidt, 1979); Wilhelm Boudriot, *Die Altgermanische Religion in Der Amtlichen Kirchlichen Literatur Des Abendlandes Vom 5. Bis 11. Jahrhundert.* (Bohn: Röhrscheid, 1964).

<sup>38</sup> Aron Gurevič, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990): 36-37; Dieter Harmening, 'Superstitio: Überlieferungs- und theoriegeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur kirchlich-theologischen Aberglaubensliteratur des Mittelalters' (Berlin, BRD, E. Schmidt, 1979).

<sup>39</sup> For a more nuanced view and an overview of the scholarly debate see: Filotas, *Pagan Survivals, Superstitions and Popular Cultures in Early Medieval Pastoral Literature*; Austin, 'The Bishop, "Magic" and Women'. Austin presents evidence that at least some of the questions might have originated in Burchard's observations in his diocese: "The specificity of the questions, their lack of precedent in that textual tradition, and the evidence from Burchard's *Life* all suggest that Burchard sought to regulate the practices and beliefs of local laywomen in his diocese."

<sup>40</sup> It is possible to see this influence in the way Burchard discussed marriage and sexual practices, for instance. Uta-Renate Blumenthal, 'The Prohibition of Clerical Marriage in the Eleventh Century', *The Jurist: Studies in Church Law and Ministry* 68, no. 1 (2008): 22-37, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jur.2008.0001>.

<sup>41</sup> Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto Others*, 3rd edition (London New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 53.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* The act of shedding blood or touching corpses could also put the clergy in a state of ritual impurity, see: Amy G. Remensnyder, 'Pollution, Purity, and Peace: An Aspect of Social Reform between the Late Tenth Century and 1076', in *The Peace of God*, ed. Thomas Head and Richard Landes (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), 280-307, <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501725562-016>.

since the boundaries between orthodoxy and heterodoxy were blurred even amongst the clergy. Sources show that lay people were not the only ones believing in or even – perhaps – practicing “magic”, and manuals such as the *Corrector* not only prescribed penance to the laity but could also teach the clergy how one should conduct oneself.

With this piece, I intend to look at a broader concept of religious dissent which focuses on discourse about (potential) religious diversity on the eve of the Gregorian Reform, as opposed to heretical movements. I see Burchard as a precursor to the reform movements that are going to flourish in the second half of the eleventh century. I argue that he understood that managing ritual and making it a prerogative of the male clergy was a way of claiming authority.<sup>43</sup> I also aim to find out if there is a difference between penance prescribed for practices that were labelled as “pagan” and other “magical” practices described in the *Corrector*, as an initial exploration towards discerning Burchard’s understanding of what he called *ars magica* and what that means for his wider view on ritual purity. In order to do so, I have looked at six questions from the *Corrector* and their corresponding penance.

### *Ars Magica*

Out of a total of one hundred and ninety-two questions, forty-eight refer to some type of magical practice, most of them under the heading *ars magica*. The earliest precisely datable reference to *ars magica* appears in a Carolingian edict which prohibited the drawing of lots before a duel unless they – although who “they” was referring to is unclear – lie in wait with “spells, diabolical tricks and the magical arts”.<sup>44</sup> Years later, the Council of Tours (813) admonished the faithful against using incantations and the “arts of magic” to cure men or beast.<sup>45</sup> Burchard never defined what he understood by *ars magica*, and used almost fifty technical terms to identify practitioners of “magic” throughout the *Decretum*.<sup>46</sup> I must also add the caveat that throughout this paper I ascribe certain positions and beliefs to Burchard. This is somewhat dubious practice, especially for works such as the *Corrector*,

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<sup>43</sup> Martha Rampton, ‘Burchard of Worms and Female Magical Ritual’, in *Medieval and Early Modern Ritual: Formalized Behavior in Europe, China and Japan*, ed. Joelle Rollo-Koster (BRILL, 2002), 7–34, [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004475830\\_006](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004475830_006), 13.

<sup>44</sup> *Conc. Neuchingense (772)*, MGH *Concilia* 2.1: 100: “De pugna duorum, quod *wehadinc* vocatur, ut prius non sortiantur, quam perati sint, ne forte carminibus vel machinis diabolicis vel magicis artibus insidiantur.”

<sup>45</sup> *Conc. Turonense (813)*, MGH *Concilia* 2.1: 292: “Admoneant sacerdotes fideles populos, ut noverint magicas artes incantationesque quibuslibet infirmitatibus hominum nihil posse remedii confere, non animalibus languentibus claudicantibusve vel etiam moribundis quicquam mederi, non ligaturas ossum vel herbarum cuiquam mortalium adhibitas prodesse, sed haec esse laqueos et insidias antiqui hostis, quibus ille perfidus genus humanum decipere nititur.”

<sup>46</sup> *Ariolus, aruspex, augur, caragijs, cocriocus, divinus, herbarius, incantator, magus, maleficus, necromanta, obligatur, praecantator, praedicator, pithon, somnarius, sortilegus, suffitor, tempestarius, vaticinatur, and veneficus* and their variations. Filotas, *Pagan Survivals, Superstitions and Popular Cultures in Early Medieval Pastoral Literature*, 219.



which is an amalgamation of writings borrowed from various authors over several centuries. However, even though there is no evidence that Burchard and the various hands which compiled his work would have agreed with every canon in the *Corrector*, it is fair to assume that it must mostly reflect Burchard's convictions. We know that Burchard interpreted his sources freely, modifying them and altering passages to bring them into line with his own ideas about reform, as well as added several new canons which do not appear in other sources.<sup>47</sup> The conception of "pagan" is merely a facet of Burchard's understanding of *ars magica*, and therefore I make no attempt to provide his definition of this notion just yet.<sup>48</sup>

Burchard's understanding of *ars magica* seems to be consistent with that of Augustine of Hippo, in the sense that, according to him, miracles were allowed by and through God and marvels which were not performed for His honour and for the public good were deceitful tricks performed by demons.<sup>49</sup> For Burchard, however, believed that demons could create illusions which may make people think that they were performing marvels, when, in reality, they were not. Marvels, according to Burchard, are only possible through God.<sup>50</sup> Other writers from late antiquity and from the Middle Ages drew from Augustine: in his treatise *De magicis artibus*, Hrabanus Maurus, the ninth-century theologian and archbishop of Mainz also condemned incantations and divination.<sup>51</sup> Burchard and his compilers made substantial use of Hrabanus' *De consanguineorum nuptiis et magorum praestigiis* in order to define certain "magical" practices as well as for differentiating different types of practitioners (*magi, necromantii, hydromantii*).<sup>52</sup>

Out of these forty-eight questions, six use the word "pagan" when

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<sup>47</sup> Rampton, 'Burchard of Worms and Female Magical Ritual', 2002.

<sup>48</sup> Which, for the sake of convenience I will from now on refer to as magic. Scholars have looked at other dimensions of magical practices within Burchard's work, including the undead, ghosts and spirits, Andrea Maraschi, 'There Is More than Meets the Eye. Undead, Ghosts and Spirits in the Decretum of Burchard of Worms' 8, no. 1 (2019), [https://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2019/08/maraschi\\_decretum\\_burchard\\_of\\_worms.pdf](https://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2019/08/maraschi_decretum_burchard_of_worms.pdf). Love magic Larissa de Freitas Lyth, 'Women's Sexuality as a Threat: Erotic Magic in Burchard of Worms' Corrector Sive Medicus', in *Becoming a Witch: Women and Magic in Europe during the Middle Ages and Beyond*, ed. Andrea Maraschi and Angelica Aurora Montanari (Budapest: Trivent, 2023); Andrea Vanina Neyra, 'La Magia Erótica En El Corrector Sive Medicus de Burchard von Worms', *Brathair* 10, no. 1 (2010): 83-99. As well as magic performed by women Rampton, 'Burchard of Worms and Female Magical Ritual', 2002.

<sup>49</sup> This is a rather simplistic explanation on how Augustine viewed *ars magica*. For more information see 21.6 of the *City of God*: "Neque enim potuit, nisi primum ipsis docentibus, disci quid quisque illorum appetat, quid exhorreat, quo invitetur nomine, quo cogatur - unde magicae artes earumque artifices extiterunt". Augustine, *The city of God against the pagans: in seven volumes. 7: Books XXI - XXII / with an Engl. transl. by William M. Green*, Reprinted, The Loeb classical library 417 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1995). For an overview see: Robert Austin Markus, 'Augustine on Magic: A Neglected Semiotic Theory', *Revue Des Études Augustiniennes* 40 (1994): 375-88.

<sup>50</sup> Rampton, 'Burchard of Worms and Female Magical Ritual', 29.

<sup>51</sup> Hrabanus Maurus, *De magicis artibus*. PL 110, cols. 1095-110.

<sup>52</sup> This was heavily used as a source by Burchard and his compilers, although Burchard failed to mention Hrabanus and attributed canons 10.41-47 to Augustine, see: Austin, *Shaping Church Law around the Year 1000*, 113.

referring to certain practices. This is the first one in Book 19:

“Have you consulted sorcerers, and brought them into your house to seek evil arts, or for the purpose of making purifications, or, following the custom of the pagans, did you invite diviners to ask about the future almost like prophets? Or have you invited those who practice spells, or those who through enchantments try to see into the future, or those who devote themselves to either auguries or enchantments? If you have done so, you shall do penance for two years on the appointed days.”<sup>53</sup>

At least five other questions in the *Corrector* inquire about some kind of divination – which shows this was a concern for Burchard – although divination, in and of itself, was not always linked to the idea of pagan.<sup>54</sup> Burchard started this discussion in Book 10 of the *Decretum*, called *De incantatoribus et auguribus*, and then used the same principles to guide him in the writing of the *Corrector*.<sup>55</sup> Canons 10.46-47, in Book 10 – incorrectly attributed to Augustine – argue that demons may be able to predict future events.<sup>56</sup> Thus, a diviner would learn about the future not through their own knowledge, but through the aid of demons. Demons, Burchard believed, are not able to predict future events: they simply use their heightened senses and their ability to read the signs of nature to obtain this knowledge. For Burchard and for other medieval thinkers, God alone created the world and only God had power and absolute knowledge over it. Thus, the belief that any being other than God would know about the future should be condemned.<sup>57</sup>

In Book 10 of the *Decretum*, once again, Burchard discusses a series of practices and beliefs that were seen as unchristian and, as such, were prohibited by the Church. Some of the practices discussed in this chapter reappear throughout Book 19, the *Corrector*, but phrased as a

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<sup>53</sup> “Consuluisti magos, et in domum tuam induxisti exquirendi aliquid arte malefica, aut expiandi causa, vel, paganorum consuetudinem sequens, divinos qui tibi divinarent, ut futura ab eis requireres quasi a propheta, et illos qui sortes exercent, vel qui per sortes sperant se futura praescire, vel illos qui vel auguriis vel incantationibus inserviunt, ad te invitasti? Si fecisti, duos annos per legitimas ferias poeniteas”, *DB19.5-61*, 509.

<sup>54</sup> Even though, in general terms, divination was associated with the word “pagan”. The author of the eight-century *Homilia de sacrilegiis* labels anyone who believed in fortune tellers as “pagan”. Martha Rampton, *Trafficking with Demons: Magic, Ritual, and Gender from Late Antiquity to 1000* (Cornell University Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501735301>, 297.

<sup>55</sup> I am not going to discuss Book 10 at length, but I must digress once again in order to present some of the ideas used by Burchard when writing Book 19. For more in-depth information on Book 10 see Austin, *Shaping Church Law*, 174-181.

<sup>56</sup> For a discussion on Burchard’s sources see Austin, *Shaping Church Law around the Year 1000*, 133.

<sup>57</sup> Austin, *Shaping Church Law around the Year 1000*, 176-177. Austin also points out that Burchard drew heavily from Hrabanus Maurus, who had a similar view on the matter. See: Matthew B. Edholm, ‘Re-examining Hrabanus Maurus’ Letter on Incest and Magic’, *Early Medieval Europe* 31, no. 2 (May 2023): 252-73, <https://doi.org/10.1111/emed.12624>.

question.<sup>58</sup> In Book 10, for example, Burchard writes a rubric that sums up one of the principles of the *Corrector*. It reads, “Regarding those who seek salvation not from the Saviour but from his creation” (*De illis qui salutem non a Salvatore sed ab eius creatura requirunt*). This summarizes the canon’s condemnation of all those who seek salvation in soothsayers, magicians and idols. Relying on them was not only an offense against God, but also against the unity of Christendom.<sup>59</sup> Laypeople were not the only ones tempted to consult magicians and the like. In Book 10 Burchard suggests two different penances for those who practice divination: three years for clergy and one and a half years for laypeople (*clerici annos tres, laici annum unum et dimidium*).<sup>60</sup> Burchard is not clear about who these diviners were, but the way that he phrased his questions indicates action, rather than simply belief in divination. According to Rampton “still, at its most basic, ritual always involves action in some way”.<sup>61</sup> Rampton argued that “there was alarm at what, in Burchard’s view, was an ill-defined female power, threatening to men, operating on the village level, a power being worked out through ritualisation and the perpetuation of myths and symbols, the vocabulary of which was unmediated by the church”.<sup>62</sup> Recently, Austin analysed canons on laywomen and the supernatural and further developed Rampton’s discussions, arguing that both the *Canon Episcopi* and the *Decretum* “emphasise that the clergy provide the only conduit for the laity to reach God, the only true source of supernatural authority”.<sup>63</sup> Thus, the emphasis on ritual in questions which used the term *paganus* was part of Burchard’s wider views on ritual purity as an attempt to differentiate the clergy from the laity, on the eve of the Gregorian Reform. The *Corrector* attempted to reinforce the monopoly of the male clergy over the supernatural by condemning any type of ritual which did not follow appropriate liturgy and was not mediated by the clergy.

The following question was taken from Book 19, but also appears in several canons in Book 10.<sup>64</sup> It refers to the worshipping of natural elements and to the idea that people could interfere in how they behave.

“If you have observed the traditions of the pagans, which, as

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<sup>58</sup> Austin, *Shaping Church Law*, 174-181.

<sup>59</sup> Edholm, ‘Re-examining Hrabanus Maurus’ Letter on Incest and Magic’.

<sup>60</sup> “Auguria vel sortes quae dicuntur falsae sanctorum, vel divinaciones, qui eas observaverint, vel quarumcunque scripturarum, vel votum voverint, vel persolverint ad arborem, vel ad lapidem, vel ad quamlibet rem, except ad Ecclesiam, omnes excommunicentur. Si ad poenitentiam venerint, clerici annos tres, laici annum unum et dimidium, poeniteant”, 352.

<sup>61</sup> Rampton, ‘Burchard of Worms and Female Magical Ritual’, 15.

<sup>62</sup> Martha Rampton, ‘Burchard of Worms and Female Magical Ritual’, in *Medieval and Early Modern Ritual: Formalized Behavior in Europe, China and Japan*, ed. Joelle Rollo-Koster (BRILL, 2002), 7-34, [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004475830\\_006](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004475830_006), 33.

<sup>63</sup> Austin, ‘The Bishop, “Magic” and Women’, 7.

<sup>64</sup> DB 10.13 condemns observing the beliefs of pagans and worshipping the moon or the stars’ courses, or considering any omens for building a house or getting married.

if by hereditary right established by devil, up to these days the fathers have always bequeathed to their sons, that is to say, have you worshiped the elements, that is the moon, or the sun, or the course of the stars, the new moon, or the eclipse of the moon? Did you think that you were able to restore their splendour by your cries, or that those elements were able to help you? Or did you wait for the new moon to build a house or to form a marriage? If you have done so, you shall do penance for two years on the appointed day, because it is written: "Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of our Lord Jesus."<sup>65</sup>

In many religions and cultures, natural phenomena were omens for significant events in people's lives and had capacity to directly affect the course of people's lives.<sup>66</sup> Here Burchard condemns idolatry and the worshipping of anything else that could be linked to what he considered "pagan", such as inanimate objects and natural sites. This was a concern during Burchard's time, not only due to the pagan associations linked to the worship of nature, but also because of the constant attempt by the Church to draw a hard line between the sacred and the profane. This principle is made clear when one canon in book 10 allows prayers to be said over crops, but not "incantations".<sup>67</sup> Burchard also reiterates his message by quoting from Colossians 3:17.<sup>68</sup> That is, whatever one did, one ought to do it in the name of God as opposed to natural forces. Once again, the verb used by the bishop indicates action, that is, *facere*. Later, another question under the heading *ars magica* does not use the word "pagan" but refers to the worship of nature: "Did you come to any place to pray other than a church [...] that is, to fountains or trees, or to stones, or to crossroads?" Penance in both cases is quite harsh: two and three years on the appointed days.<sup>69</sup> Any kind of idolatry, or worship of inanimate objects, was prohibited and seen as demonic since only the Christian

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<sup>65</sup> "Si observasti traditiones paganorum, quas, quasi haereditario jure diabolo subministrante, usque in hos dies semper patres filiis reliquerunt, id est ut elementa coleres, id est lunam aut solem, aut stellarum cursum, novam lunam, aut defectum lunae, ut tuis clamoribus aut auxilio splendorem ejus restaurare valeres, aut illa elementa tibi succurrere aut tu illis posses, aut novam lunam observasti pro domo facienda aut conjugii sociandis? Si fecisti, duos annos per legitimas ferias poeniteas, quia scriptum est: 'Omne quodcunque facitis in verbo et in opere, omnia in nomine Domini nostri Jesu Christi facite'", *DB* 19.62, 509.

<sup>66</sup> Filotas has a long overview about different ways in which the cult of nature was discussed in medieval sources, see: Filotas, *Pagan Survivals, Superstitions and Popular Cultures in Early Medieval Pastoral Literature*, 120-152.

<sup>67</sup> Austin, *Shaping Church Law around the Year 1000*, 176.

<sup>68</sup> "And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him", Col. 3:17 KJV.

<sup>69</sup> "Venisti ad aliquem locum ad orandum nisi ad ecclesiam vel ad alium locum religiosum quam episcopus tuus vel tuus sacerdos tibi ostenderet, id est vel ad fontes, vel ad lapides, vel ad arbores, vel ad bivia, et ibi aut candela aut faculam pro venerationem illuc detulisti aut ibi comedisti, aut aliquam salute corporis aut anime ibi requisisti? Si fecisti, aut consensisti, tres annos per legitimas ferias poeniteas."

God had the power to affect people's lives and the physical world.<sup>70</sup>

The next passage is also in DB 10.16-17, where Burchard prohibits observing the first of January (*de illis qui Kalendas Ianuarias ritu paganorum colere praesumunt*), but the canons from Book 10 are amalgamated and expanded in the following passage from Book 19:

“Did you observe the first of January, according to the rites of the pagans, that you did something more for the New Year than what you normally do before, or after, namely: that you would prepare your table in your house by arranging stones or banquets, or you would lead singers and dancers through the streets or you would sit on the roof of your house and draw a circle with your sword so that you could see and understand what would happen to you in the following year? or did you sit on the skin of a bull at a crossroads so that you might understand what was going to happen to you in the future? or if you made bread for yourself the night before, so that if it rose well and became dense and high you would foresee prosperity for your life that year? If so, because you have forsaken God your Creator, and converted to idols and those vain things, you have become an apostate and you shall do penance for two years on the appointed days.”<sup>71</sup>

Although this question was taken from Book 19, the first part of this canon can also be found in Book 10 and seems to have been taken from Regino's *Libri duo*.<sup>72</sup> The general scriptural idea, in this case, is that Christians should not observe customs that presuppose beliefs in some other religion or power. In addition to this canon by Regino, Burchard added more information from unknown formal sources. These additions agree with the previous prohibition and give specific examples of forbidden “pagan” practices, such as decorating one's house with laurel or leading singers through the streets.<sup>73</sup> One more question under the heading *ars magica* mentions the first of January,

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<sup>70</sup> Austin, *Shaping Church Law around the Year 1000*, 177.

<sup>71</sup> “Observasti Kalendas Ianuarias ritu paganorum, ut vel aliquid plus faceres propter novum annum quam antea, vel post soleres facere, ita dico ut aut mensam tuam cum lapidibus vel epulis in domo tua praeparares eo tempore, aut per vicus et per plateas cantores et choros duceres, aut supra tectum domus tuae sederes, ense tuo circumsignatus, ut ibi videres et intelligeres quid tibi in sequenti anno futurum esset? vel in bivio sedisti supra taurinam cutem, ut et ibi futura tibi intelligeres? vel si panes praedicta nocte coquere fecisti tuo nomine, ut, si bene elevarentur, et spissi et alti fierent, inde prosperitatem tuae vitae eo anno praevideres? Ideo, quia Deum creatorem tuum dereliquisti, et ad idola et ad illa vana te convertisti, et apostata effectus es, duos annos per legitimas ferias poeniteas”, *DB 19.63*, 509-510.

<sup>72</sup> For more information on how Burchard drew from *Libri duo* see: Ludger Körntgen, ‘Canon Law and the Practice of Penance: Burchard of Worms's Penitential’, *Early Medieval Europe* 14, no. 1 (January 2006): 103-17, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0254.2006.00176.x>.

<sup>73</sup> “Si quis Kalendas Ianuarias ritu paganorum colere, vel aliquid plus novi facere propter novum annum, aut mensas cum lapidibus vel epulis in domibus suis preparare, et per vicus et plateas cantatores et choros ducere praesumpserit, anathema sit”.

but the penance in this case in only thirty days on bread and water.<sup>74</sup> DB 19.63 likely condemns this type of celebration of the first of January on the basis that it does not resemble – or that it was an inappropriate – celebration of the Octave, which was not mediated by the Church.<sup>75</sup> The next question in Book 19 which mentions *ritu paganorum* also involves inappropriate singing.

“Have you observed the funeral wakes, that is, were you were present at the vigils where the bodies of Christians were kept according to the rites of the pagans; and there you sang devilish songs, and there you performed the dances which the pagans devised according to the teachings of the devil; and there you drank, and you twisted your mouth with loud laughter; abandoning all piety and charity, as if rejoicing in death of a brother? If you have done so, you shall do penance for thirty days on bread and water.”<sup>76</sup>

DB 19.93 seems to follow the same principle, prohibiting community-based practices that resemble the Church ones, thus reminding laypeople that only male clergy could perform rituals which provided access to the supernatural.<sup>77</sup> As in Book 6 of the *Decretum*, some canons anathematize or excommunicate offenders without stating a particular penance. For instance, DB 10.15-17 prohibits various practices pertaining to the kalends of January and funerals, but the canons in Book 10 lack a penance or conclude with the lines, “Let him be anathema” (*anathema sit*).<sup>78</sup> Upon closer look, one can find the appropriate penance in DB 10.33, which describes several offenses and provides penance for all of these: five years of penance for monks, four for clergy, two for laity.<sup>79</sup> Which again shows magical

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<sup>74</sup> “Fecisti aliquid tale quale pagani facerunt et adhuc faciunt in Kalenda Januarii, in cervulo, vel in vegula? Si fecisti, triginta dies in pane et aqua debes poeniteas.”, *DB 19.64*, 515.

<sup>75</sup> Canon 17 of the Second Council of Tours (567) proclaimed the entire period between Christmas and Epiphany as part of Christmastide. The eight day, or the Octave, was the first of January and was the feast of the circumcision of Christ: “De Decembri usque ad natale Domini et epiphania omni die festivitates sunt, itemque prandebunt. Excipitur triduum illud, quo ad calcandam gentilium consuetudinem, patres nostril statuerunt privatas in Kalendis Januarii fieri litanias, ut in ecclesiis psallatur, et hora octava in ipsis Kalendis Circumcisionis missa Deo propitio celebretur.” Jean Hardouin, Philippe Labbé, and Gabriel Cossart, eds., *Acta Conciliorum et Epistolae Decretales* (Paris: Typographia Regia, 1714).

<sup>76</sup> “Observasti excubias funeris, id est interfuisti vigiliis cadaverum mortuorum ubi Christianorum corpora ritu paganorum custodiebantur, et cantasti ibi diabolica carmina, et fecisti ibi saltationes quas pagani diabolo docente adinvenerunt; et ibi bibisti, et cachinnis ora dissolvisti, et, omni pietate et affectu charitatis postposito, quasi de fraterna morte exsultare visus es? Si fecisti, XXX dies in pane et aqua poeniteas”, *DB 19.93*, 513.

<sup>77</sup> Austin, “The Bishop, “Magic” and Women”, 5.

<sup>78</sup> “Non licet iniquas observations agree Kalendarum, et otiis vacare, neque lauro, aut viriditate arborum cingere domos. Omnis haec observation paganorum est.”

<sup>79</sup> “Quicumque execuerint hoc, quando luna obscuratur, et cum clamoribus suis ac maleficiis et sacrilego usu se posse defendere credant, et quicumque divinos praecantatores phylacteria etiam diabolica, vel characters diabolicos, vel herbas, vel sucos, suis sibi impendere tantaverint, vel quintam feriam in honorem Jovis, vel Kalendas Januarias secundum paganam consuetudinem honorare praesumpserit,

practices were not seen by the compilers as a problem just amongst laypeople.<sup>80</sup> The first item in Book 10 is also in Book 19. It is a well-known passage taken from Regino's *Libri duo*, which Burchard attributes not to Regino, but to the Council of Ancyra:

“Have you believed or participated in this incredulity, that some wicked women who, seduced by illusions and phantasms of demons, turned back after Satan, [they] believe and profess: with Diana, goddess of the pagans, and an unnumbered multitude of women, they ride on certain beasts and traverse many areas of the earth in the silence of the night, obey her commands as if she was their mistress, and are called upon on certain nights to her service? But if only you alone should perish in your perfidy and not drag many with you into your weakness. For an unnumbered multitude, deceived by this false opinion, believe these things to be true and, in believing this, deviate from the right faith, and go back to the error of the pagans, when they think there is any divinity or heavenly authority except God. But the devil transforms himself into the shape and likeness of many people, deluding in sleep the mind which he holds captive, now with joy, now with sadness. Now showing unknown people, he leads them in deviant ways, and while only the spirit suffers, the mind of the unfaithful thinks that these things happen not in spirit, but in body. For who has not been led out of themselves, during night visions, and who while sleeping has not seen many things which they never saw while awake? Who then is so foolish and stupid to assume that those things which take place in spirit only, also happen in the body? When the prophet Ezekiel saw and heard visions in the spirit, not in the body, he himself spoke thus: ‘Immediately’, says he, ‘I was a spirit.’ And Paul does not venture to say that he was caught up in the body. Therefore, it is to be openly announced to all, that those who believe such things lose their faith; and those who have no sound faith in God are not his, but in whom he believes, that is, the devil. For it is written of our Lord: ‘All things were made by him, and without him was made nothing.’ If you have believed

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monachus V, clericus IV, laicus II, annos poeniteat.” See also Austin, *Shaping Church Law around the Year 1000*, 179.

<sup>80</sup> “Quicumque exercuerint hoc, quando luna obscuratur, ut cum clamoribus suis ac maleficiis et sacrilego usu se posse defendere credant, et quicumque divinos praecantatores phylacteria etiam diabolica, vel characteres diabolicos, vel herbas, vel sucos, suis vel sibi impendere tentaverint, vel quintam feriam in honorem Jovis, vel Kalen. Janua. secundum paganam consuetudinem honorare praesumpserit, monachus V, clericus IV, laicus II, annos poeniteat.”

these vanities, you shall do penance for two years on the appointed days.”<sup>81</sup>

This is probably the most well-known passage of the *Corrector* and it was quoted almost verbatim from Regino’s *Libri duo*, and it later became known as *Canon Episcopi*. It starts with the verb *credidisti* and so it does not refer to a specific action or ritual. Rather, it condemns the *belief* that one went on nocturnal cavalcades with Diana. By analysing this passage, it is possible to identify a few patterns which also appear in other questions concerning the idea of “magic” throughout the *Corrector*. Most importantly, believing that any being other than the Christian God has the power to create or change things should be prohibited: “God is omnipotent, the *Decretum* condemns those who believe in any other power to cause change in the world, except by the will of God.”<sup>82</sup> An interesting point could also be made about how Burchard was troubled by the idea that Christians could potentially deviate from their faith and relapse into paganism. When analysing this same passage in Regino’s *Libri duo*, Christ Halsted discussed the levels of transmission which might have affected the way in which the *Canon Episcopi* might have been interpreted during Regino’s lifetime. “Transmission along a chain of interlocutors who likely did not understand or endorse this belief, translation from vernacular to Latin, and whatever additional modifications Regino made himself together compound the distortion between source and text.”<sup>83</sup> The same can be said of Burchard and his compilers, who

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<sup>81</sup> “Credidisti aut particeps fuisti illius incredulitatis, quod quaedam sceleratae mulieres retro post Satanam conversae, daemonum illusionibus et phantasmatibus seductae, credunt et profitentur se nocturnis horis cum Diana paganorum dea, et cum innumera multitudine mulierum equitare super quasdam bestias, et multa terrarum spatia intempestae noctis silentio pertransire, eiusque iussionibus velut dominae obedire, et certis noctibus ad eius servitium evocari? Sed utinam hae solae in perfidia sua perissent, et non multos secum in infirmitatis interitum pertraxissent. Nam innumera multitudo, hac falsa opinione decepta, haec vera esse credit, et credendo a recta fide deviat, et in errore paganorum volvitur, cum aliquid divinitatis aut numinis extra unum Deum esse arbitrat. Sed diabolus transformat se in diversarum personarum species atque similitudines, et mentem, quam captivam tenet, in somnis deludens, modo laeta, modo tristia, modo incognitas personas ostendens, per devia quaeque deducit, et cum solus spiritus hoc patitur, infidelis mens haec non in animo, sed in corpore evenire opinatur. Quis enim non in somnis et nocturnis visionibus extra seipsum educitur, et multa videt dormiendo quae nunquam viderat vigilando? Quis vero tam stultus et hebes sit qui haec omnia, quae in solo spiritu fiunt, etiam in corpore accidere arbitretur? Cum Ezechiel propheta visiones Domini in spiritu, non in corpore, vidit et audivit, sicut ipse dicit: ‘Statim, inquit, fui in spiritu.’ Et Paulus non audet se dicere raptum in corpore. Omnibus itaque publice annuntiandum est quod qui talia et his similia credit, fidem perdit: et qui fidem rectam in Deo non habet, hic non est eius, sed illius in quem credit, id est diaboli. Nam de Domino nostro scriptum est: ‘Omnia per ipsum facta sunt, et sine ipso factum est nihil.’ Si credidisti has vanitates, duos annos per legitimas ferias poeniteas”, *DB* 19.5-91, 512-513.

<sup>82</sup> Austin, “*Shaping Church Law*”, 176.

<sup>83</sup> Halsted not only presented a critique of various readings of the *Canon Episcopi*, but also, through a philological approach, argued that the text reveals an inversion of the imagery of masculine dominance during the Carolingian period, due to anxieties generated by elite crises and the anxieties of elite men. Chris Halsted, “‘They Ride on the Backs of Certain Beasts’: The Night Rides, the Canon Episcopi, and Regino of Prüm’s Historical Method”, *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 15, no. 3 (2021): 361–85, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mrw.2021.0009>.



copied the text several years later, thus adding a different contextual layer to the chain of transmission. Burchard's idea of paganism, however, seems to be simply believing that there was another divinity other than the Christian God (*et in errore paganorum volvitur, cum aliquid divinitatis aut numinis extra unum Deum esse arbitratur*). Only God can change something into something else thus, any sort of shapeshifting was viewed as magic, as well as any kind of power to change emotions. Furthermore, "even though Burchard did not believe women fly, there was a danger if they themselves believed it because that belief had the power to transform their understanding of the cosmos" – and perhaps, in turn, their understanding of who had access to otherworldly powers.

### Concluding remarks

Overall, most practices that are under the heading *ars magica* and that are not labelled as "pagan" by Burchard receive shorter penance – for example: ten days of penance for the gathering of herbs,<sup>84</sup> a year of penance for causing it to rain<sup>85</sup> – whereas practices labelled as "pagan" receive a penance of at least two years. As I have discussed during my historiographical digression, the concept of pagan is a blurry one in general and even more so during the Middle Ages. Hence, I do not suggest that these practices have indeed survived from pre-Christian times. My aim was to determine if Burchard had any internal logic when labelling certain practices as pagan and to observe the severity or leniency of the penances prescribed for such acts, in order to better understand his notion of *ars magica*.

What I am tentatively pointing out is that there are two main characteristics pertaining these so-called pagan practices in the *Corrector sive medicus*: firstly, most of these questions indicate action rather than belief. Questions are phrased using words such as *observasti*, or *fecisti*, rather than *credidisti* which is more common in other questions related to *ars magica*.<sup>86</sup> Even questions that do start with the word *fecisti* offer more lenient penance when they are not referring to pagan beliefs, the harshest one being twenty days on bread and water.<sup>87</sup> Secondly, and perhaps related to the previous

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<sup>84</sup> "Collegisti herbas medicinales, cum aliis incantationibus cum symbolo et Dominica oratione, id est cum Credo in Deum et Pater noster cantando. Si aliter fecisti, decem dies in pane et aqua poeniteas", *DB 19.66*, 510.

<sup>85</sup> "Credidisti unquam vel particeps fuisti illius perfidiae, ut incantatores et qui se dicunt tempestatum immissores esse, possent per incantationem daemonum aut tempestates commovere aut mentes hominum mutare? Si credidisti, aut particeps fuisti, annum unum per legitimas ferias poeniteas", *DB 19.69*, 510.

<sup>86</sup> Four questions that do not mention anything "pagan" start with the word *credidisti*.

<sup>87</sup> "Fecisti quod quidam faciunt, dum visitant aliquem infirmum: cum apropinquaverint domui ubi infirmus decumbit, si invenerint aliquem lapidem juxta jacentem, revolvunt lapidem, et requirunt in loco ubi jacebat lapis, si ibi sit aliquid subtus quod vivat, et si invenerint ibi lubricum, aut muscam, aut formicam, aut aliquid quod se moveat, tunc affirmant aegrotum convalescere. Si autem nihil ibi invenerint quod se moveat, dicunt esse moriturum. Si fecisti, aut credidisti, viginti dies in pane et aqua poeniteas.", *DB 19.103*, 515.

characteristic, practices labelled as pagan often seem to have a ritualistic component. That is, people would gather at a certain place, sometimes during a specific time – as in the first of January, for instance – and would perform certain activities in a specific way. This seems to be in keeping with Burchard’s wider view on ritual purity and the differentiation between laypeople and clergy prior to the Gregorian Reform. The only legitimate way to reach the divine was through the Church, and only male clergy were in a state of ritual purity which allowed them to carry out rituals such as the Eucharistic feast in which the laity could access the sacred.

Furthermore, Burchard had a principle underlying all questions about *ars magica*: only the Christian god had the power to create things or cause a change in the physical world. Divination was also condemned because only the Christian God was all knowing and knew about future events. According to Burchard, demons could not predict future events, but simply use their senses and their ability to read the signs of nature in order to obtain this knowledge.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, the belief that any being other than the Christian God had the power to create or change the course of people’s lives was condemned, because only God can cause change in the physical world and affect people’s emotions. People or creatures who said they could do such things were in fact aided by demons or were demons themselves. Hence any sort of shapeshifting was viewed as magic, as well as any kind of power to change someone else’s feelings and emotions.

This was merely an attempt at elucidating Burchard of Worms’ understanding of magic according to his writings on *ars magica*. For a more thorough understanding, it might also be helpful to look at the penance prescribed for practices considered as *de sacrilegio*, *de superstitione* and *de incredulis*. The *Corrector sive medicus* has often been examined by historians not only because of how influential it was during the Middle Ages but also because it was infused with specific detail that is not found in other penitential manuals and might as well reflect local belief and practice in south-western Germany. The approach I have adopted here tries to focus on Burchard’s internal logic when writing the *Corrector* rather than attempting to find the (supposedly) archaic origins of the practices which he described. Medieval religious culture can be thought of as an amalgam of official and unofficial beliefs, which were shared and lived by all levels of society although perhaps to different degrees. Talking about a “popular” culture is perilous, since this approach normally ignores the question of who the “people” are and ascribes a whole set of practices to a single social group. We should instead consider the context of the source, as well as the context of the author and of the community they

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<sup>88</sup> Austin, “*Shaping Church Law*”, 177.

describe. Burchard's understanding of *ars magica* is indeed rather rich influenced by various writers, and merits further investigation.

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### Abbreviations

- MGH – *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*  
DB – *Decretum Burchardi*, Ms. Barth. 50

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