Circa 560 B.C.

1. The Bible condemns witches.

Exodus 22:18 Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live. (KJV)

Leviticus 20:27 A man also or woman that hath a familiar spirit, or that is a wizard, shall surely be put to death: they shall stone them with stones: their blood shall be upon them. (KJV)

Exodus and Leviticus, two Old Testament books that make up part of the “Law of Moses” and the primary history of the Jewish people, were written in the sixth century B.C. by a Jewish writer—whose name we do not know. The books, which include the passages quoted above that assume the existence of witches and urge that they be killed, were most likely written in what is present-day Iraq during the reign of Evil Merodach, a dark time of Jewish exile, around 560 B.C. The author was most likely a priest, and might have been assisted in his work by other priests and scribes.

The word “witch” in Exodus is a translation of the Hebrew word “kashaph,” which comes from the root meaning “to whisper.” The word as used in Exodus probably thus meant “one who whispers a spell.” In context, the Exodus passage probably was intended to urge Jews to adhere to their own religious practices and not those of surrounding tribes.

Circa 420

2. St. Augustine argues witchcraft is an impossibility

Saint Augustine of Hippo, an influential theologian in the early Christian Church, argued in the early 400s that God alone could suspend the normal laws of the universe. In his view, neither Satan nor witches had supernatural powers or were capable of effectively invoking magic of any sort. It was the "error of the pagans" to believe in "some other divine power than the one God." Of course, if witches are indeed powerless, the Church need not overly concern itself with their spells or other attempts at mischief.

The late medieval Church accepted St. Augustine’s view, and hence felt little need to bother itself with tracking down witches or investigating allegations of witchcraft.
3. Satan becomes sinister following Pope Innocent III's attack on Cathar heretics.

In 1208, Pope Innocent III opened an attack on Cathar heretics who believed in a world in which God and Satan, both having supernatural powers, were at war. The Church attempted to discredit the Cathar belief by spreading stories that the heretics actually worshiped their evil deity in person. Propagandists for the Church depicted Cathars kissing the anus of Satan in a ceremonial show of loyalty to him. As a result of the Church's sustained attacks, the public's understanding of Satan moved from that of a mischievous spoiler to a deeply sinister force.

4. Thomas Aquinas argues that demons exist that try to lead people into temptation.

In Summa Theologian, a Dominican monk named Thomas Aquinas made his case for the existence of God. In his work, much of which became adopted as the orthodoxy of the Church, Aquinas argued that the world was full of evil and dangerous demons. Among other things, Aquinas argued, these demons had the habit of reaping the sperm of men and spreading it among women. In Aquinas's mind, sex and witchcraft begin what will become a long association. Demons thus are seen as not merely seeking their own pleasure, but intent also on leading men into temptation.
mid-1400s

5. Witchcraft trials erupt in Europe

Many adherents of Catharism, fleeing a papal inquisition launched against their alleged heresies, had migrated into Germany and the Savoy. Torture inflicted on heretics suspected of magical pacts or demon-driven sexual misconduct led to alarming confessions. Defendants admitted to flying on poles and animals to attend assemblies presided over by Satan appearing in the form of a goat or other animal. Some defendants told investigators that they repeatedly kissed Satan's anus as a display of their loyalty. Others admitted to casting spells on neighbors, having sex with animals, or causing storms. The distinctive crime of witchcraft began to take shape.

1484

6. Pope Innocent VIII and *Malleus Maleficarum*

Pope Innocent announced that satanists in Germany were meeting with demons, casting spells that destroyed crops, and aborting infants. The pope asked two friars, Heinrich Kramer (a papal inquisitor of sorcerers from Innsbruck) and Jacob Sprenger, to publish a full report on the suspected witchcraft. Two years later, the friars published *Malleus maleficarum* ("Hammer of Witches") which put to rest the old orthodoxy that witches were powerless in the face of God to a new orthodoxy that held Christians had an obligation to hunt down and kill them. The *Malleus* told frightening tales of women who would have sex with any convenient demon, kill babies, and even steal penises. (The friars asked, "What is to be thought of those witches who collect...as many as twenty or thirty members together, and put them in a bird's nest or shut them up in a box, where they move themselves like living members and eat oats and corn?") Over the next forty years, the *Malleus* would be reprinted thirteen times and come to help define the crime of witchcraft. Much of the book offered hints to judges and prosecutors, such as the authors' suggestion to strip each suspect completely and inspect the body to see whether a mole was present that might be a telltale sign of consort with demons, and to have the defendants brought into court backwards to minimize their opportunities to cast dangerous spells on officials.
7. The Reformation sends kill rates up

Outbreaks of witchcraft hysteria, with subsequent mass executions, began to appear in the early 1500s. Authorities in Geneva, Switzerland burned 500 accused witches at the stake in 1515. Nine years later in Como, Italy, a spreading spiral of witchcraft charges led to as many as 1000 executions.

The Reformation divided Europe between Protestant regions and those loyal to the Pope, but Protestants took the crime of witchcraft no less seriously—and arguably even more so—than Catholics. Germany, rife with sectarian strife, saw Europe’s greatest execution rates of witches—higher than those in the rest of the Continent combined. Witch hysteria swept France in 1571 after Trois-Echelles, a defendant accused of witchcraft from the court of Charles IX, announced to the court that he had over 100,000 fellow witches roaming the country. Judges responding to the ensuing panic by eliminating for those accused of witchcraft most of the protections that other defendants enjoyed. Jean Bodin in his 1580 book, *On the Demon-Mania of Sorcerers*, opened the door to use of testimony by children against parents, entrapment, and instruments of torture.

Over the 160 years from 1500 to 1660, European records show between 50,000 and 80,000 suspected witches executed. About 80% of those killed were women. Execution rates varied greatly by country, from a high of about 26,000 in Germany to about 10,000 in France, 1,000 in England, and only four in Ireland. The lower death tolls in England and Ireland owe in part to better procedural safeguards in those countries for defendants.

Many others were executed, and no record was left behind…
1591

8. King James authorizes the torture of suspected witches in Scotland

Scotland's witch-hunting had its origins in the marriage of King James to Princess Anne of Denmark. Anne's voyage to Scotland for the wedding met with a bad storm, and she ended up taking refuge in Norway. James traveled to Scandinavia and the wedding took place in at Kronborg Castle in Denmark. After a long honeymoon in Denmark, the royal newlyweds encountered terrible seas on the return voyage, which the ship's captain blamed on witches. When six Danish women confessed to having caused the storms that bedeviled King James, he began to take witchcraft seriously. Back in Scotland, the paranoid James authorized torture of suspected witches. Dozens of condemned witches in the North Berwick area were burned at the stake in what would be the largest witch-hunt in British history. By 1597, James began to address some of the worst prosecutorial abuses, and witch-hunting abated somewhat.

1606

9. Shakespeare's Macbeth performed

As an indication of the attention witch-hunting had begun to attract in England during the executions in the era of King James, Shakespeare wrote a play, Macbeth, in which strange, bearded, hag-like witches play prominent roles.

A dark Cave. In the middle, a Cauldron boiling. Thunder. Enter the three witches.

1 WITCH. Thrice the brinded cat hath mew'd.

2 WITCH. Thrice and once, the hedge-pig whin'd.

3 WITCH. Harpier cries:—’tis time! ’tis time!

1 WITCH. Round about the cauldron go; In the poison'd entrails throw.— Toad, that under cold stone, Days and nights has thirty-one; Swelter'd venom sleeping got, Boil thou first i’ the charmed pot! ALL. Double, double toil and trouble; Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.
10. Witch-hunting, after a major outbreak in France, begins to decrease.

In 1643-1645, the largest witch-hunt in French history occurred. During those two years there were at least 650 arrests in Languedoc alone. The same time was one of intense witch-hunting in England, as the English civil war created an atmosphere of unrest that fueled the hunting, especially under Matthew Hopkins. The Thirty Years War, a conflict that raged in several European states from 1618-1648 following an attempted rebellion by Protestants in Bohemia from the Roman Catholic Hapsburg rulers, produced slaughter and suffering that sparked additional witch hunts.

The number of trials began to drop sharply, however, in the late 1640s. Holland, for example, was by 1648 a tolerant society that had done away with punishments for witchcraft.

11. England executes its last witch

In 1682, Temperance Lloyd, a senile woman from Bideford, Susannah Edwards, and Mary Trembles became the last women ever executed for witchcraft in England. Lord Chief Justice Sir Francis North, a passionate critic of witchcraft trials, investigated the Lloyd case and denounced the prosecution as deeply flawed. Sir Francis North wrote, “The evidence against them was very full and fanciful, but their own confessions exceeded it. They appeared not only weary of their own lives but to have a great deal of skill to convict themselves.”

North's criticism of the Lloyd case helped discourage additional prosecutions and witch-hunting shifted from one side of the Atlantic to the other, with the outbreak of hysteria in Salem in 1692.

The Enlightenment, beginning in the late 1680s, contributed to the end of witch-hunts throughout Europe. The Enlightenment brought empirical reason, skepticism, and humanitarianism, each of which helped defeat the superstitions of the earlier age. The Enlightenment suggested that there was no empirical evidence that alleged witches caused real harm, and taught that the use of torture to force confessions was inhumane.