CHAPTER FIVE

WITCH-HUNTERS

1. The Inquisitors’ Witches

The preceding chapters might have given the impression that during the Renaissance the inquisitors drawn from the friars of the Dominican order who exercised their office in northern Italy were, all in all, comparatively indolent—with the exception of occasional firebrands, such as Antonio da Casale, Giorgio Cacatossici and Girolamo Armellini, whose hyperactivity one might be tempted to ascribe to subjective, temperamental traits. At best, it might be thought that they were unenthusiastic ones, as seems to have been the case with those who had thrust upon them by secular rulers the unenviable task of prosecuting Waldensians. The present chapter will dispel this impression of inactivity, by showing that Antonio da Casale, Cacatossici and Armellini were far from exceptional, for it will consider six friars, drawn from both the conventual provinces and the Congregation of Lombardy, who were especially earnest prosecutors of witches. The first two belonged to the Province of St. Peter Martyr and were responsible for the same inquisitorial district, that of Vercelli, Ivrea, Novara and Como, and their combined, successive terms of office spanned almost half a century, from briefly before 1460 to well past 1500. Both men were indefatigable witch-hunters and the memory of their harsh repressions was still very much alive almost a century later, in 1586, when one of their successors as inquisitor of Vercelli and Ivrea, Cipriano Uberti da Ivrea, wrote of them “...friar Niccolò Constantini da Biella... an inquisitor who was extremely severe with the witches and by whom more than three hundred were consigned to the secular arm... friar Lorenzo Soleri, similarly terrifying to the aforementioned witches.”

1 “...fra Nicolò Constantini da Biella... severissimo inquisitore contro le streghe, sotto il quale ne diedero al braccio secolare più di 300... fra Lorenzo Solerio... similmente terribilissimo contro le sudette streghe.” Uberti, Tavola degli inquisitori, partially reproduced in Simoncelli 1988, p. 117.
could well be made on the four inquisitors drawn from the Congregation of Lombardy who will be considered: Antonio Pezzotelli da Brescia, Domenico Pirri da Gargnano, Girolamo da Lodi and Modesto Scrofa da Vicenza. These were responsible for the inquisitorial districts of Brescia, Bergamo, Mantua, and (from 1505) of Como, and, taken together, their activity also covered some fifty years, from the late 1470s to the mid-1520s.

The very brutality and scale of the persecutions that they instigated, as well as the available documentary evidence in the form of trial records and other accounts, disclose that these inquisitors subscribed to what historians have come to designate the ‘cumulative concept of witchcraft.’ That is, they accepted the diabolic interpretation of witchcraft whereby witches were not to be identified with common enchanters or sorcerers who practised either beneficial or harmful magic (maleficium), or with the sophisticated Renaissance necromancers who engaged in magical rituals by which they sought to conjure demons and have them do their bidding. Indeed, neither of these categories were, at least in theory, the direct concern of inquisitors, since they considered them to be more the victims of superstition than guilty of heresy. Renaissance inquisitors did indeed concern themselves increasingly with practitioners of ceremonial magic whom they suspected of diabolism, for the explicit invocation of demons had begun to be considered a manifestation of heresy from the time of Pope John XXII’s bull Super illius specula (1320), and, moreover, some inquisitors, such as Prierias with his neologism ‘strigimagus’, tried to blur the distinction between ritual magicians and diabolic witches. Nonetheless, simple sorcerers and ritual magicians fell primarily within the jurisdiction of episcopal courts or, in the case of performers of maleficent magic, of secular magistrates.

Rather, these inquisitors claimed to be prosecuting the adepts of an extremely dangerous, conspiratorial sect of heretics and apostates from the Christian faith that had only arisen after the beginning of the fifteenth century—an allegation that, for them, made the dismissal of witchcraft as merely superstitious and delusional by the authorita-

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3 The English expression was made popular by Levack 1995, p. 29 (first edition 1987) and has been widely adopted, see for example Behringer 2004, p. 57.

4 Hansen 1901, pp. 4–6.