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Pope Innocent VIII (1484-1492) and the *Summis desiderantes affectibus*

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At the end of the fifteenth century, Dominican friars were authorized to persecute

practitioners of certain local customs which were perceived to be witchcraft in the mountains of

Northern Italy.[1] A landmark in the chronology of these witch-hunts was the papal bull of 1484,

or the *Summis desiderantes affectibus*, and its inclusion in Heinrich Kramer's witch-hunting

codex, the *Malleus Maleficarum*. While neither the pope nor the papal bull were significantly

influential on their own, the extraordinary popularity of Kramer's *Malleus* draws attention to

them.

Pope Innocent VIII, born Giovanni Battista Cibó, was born in Genoa in 1432 into a

Roman senatorial family.[2] Cibó did not intend to become a member of the clergy and, in fact,

fathered two illegitimate children: Franceschetto and Teodorina. Nevertheless, he found himself

the bishop of Savona in the late 1460s, the bishop of Molfetta in 1472, and then cardinal of Santa

Balbina and Santa Cecilia, respectively, the following two years. The death of Pope Sixtus IV in

1484 was followed by a "night of intense negotiations and outright bribery" among cardinals to

elect the new pope.[3] Cibó's ascension was not a result of his personal strengths. Giuliano della

Rovere, cardinal and nephew to the recently deceased Pope Sixtus IV, pushed for the election of

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[1] Rusconi, "Public Purity and Discipline," 468.

[2] Cibó selected this name out of respect for Pope Innocent IV (1195-1254), who clashed with Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, believed in the strength and power of the church, and was known to be politically minded. See Weber, "Pope Innocent VIII." Senatorial families at this time were aristocrats who could trace their ancestry back to an earlier Roman senator and participated in the governance of the city of Rome.

[3] Allen, "Innocent VIII, Pope," 237.

Innocent because della Rovere saw Innocent as malleable, someone he could influence. One historian goes so far as to say that Innocent "behaved as a creature" of della Rovere.[4]

Innocent VIII's reign is somewhat overshadowed by two major events in papal history: the Western Schism of 1378-1417, during which there were multiple popes, and the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century.[5] Much of what is written about Innocent is said about his personality. He is said to have been "kindly, good natured," "easy-going but ineffective," and "irresolute, lax, chronically ill, but personally affable."[6] His "kindness was universally praised," and "everyone with whom he came into contact loved him."[7] His likability did not make up for his lack of political skill, however, which was particularly unfortunate considering the climate when he was elected—Rome was a "viper's nest."[8] Innocent VIII inherited a bankrupt papacy; preceding popes had accrued debt through war against various Italian states and significant spending on the arts and architecture.[9] Innocent VIII has also been described by modern scholars as "brazenly corrupt," and his pontificate "disastrous," although recognizing his actions were not entirely out of the ordinary for church officials in the fifteenth century.[10]

Cardinals and popes were often involved in secular politics in this period. Within cardinals' courts was a "deep interpenetration between civil and ecclesiastical societies" and a strengthening of the relationship between the cardinals and Italian elites.[11] Rather than being devoted entirely to their faith, cardinals were often motivated by personal gain and the desires of

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[4] The extent of della Rovere's influence on Innocent during his reign is unclear. Ryder, "The Papal States," 585.
[5] There were two popes for much of the schism, although a third pope was declared towards the schism's end.
[6] Allen, "Innocent VIII, Pope," 238; Kelly, "Innocent VIII."
[7] Weber, "Pope Innocent VIII"; Baumgartner, *Behind Locked Doors*, 83.
[8] Baumgartner, *Behind Locked Doors,* 83.
[9] Ryder, "The Papal States," 584.
[10] Campbell, "Innocent VIII." Ryder specifies that "general consent" deems Innocent's pontificate a disaster. Ryder, "The Papal States," 586.
[11] Fragnito, "Cardinals' Courts," 55.

secular leadership.[12] Popes, as well, strayed from solely spiritual work—the papacy was embroiled in family dramas and made unfavorable compromises that weakened its power.[13] While information regarding Innocent VIII's time as a cardinal is not readily available, he likely would have acted in response to similar motivations. As pope, he was certainly involved in both politics and family intrigue.

During Innocent VIII's pontificate, it has been suggested that papal "nepotism and financial extraction reached their […] height."[14] While this language is strong, it is not wholly inaccurate. Attempting to deal with papal bankruptcy, Innocent sold many offices, including a "college and twenty-four apostolic secretaryships, with the explicit provision that no duties whatsoever attached to them."[15] He took a loan from Italian bankers and granted them the authority to collect papal revenues, which was unprecedented.[16] Innocent, likely trying to strengthen the church's political influence, worked to form an alliance with Lorenzo de' Medici, from which Medici personally benefitted.[17] In 1487, his son Franceschetto was married to Medici's daughter; this marriage is considered the "highlight" of Innocent's papacy by one historian.[18] He both officiated and threw a feast for the wedding, the first pope to do so for his own child.[19] Innocent also made Medici's son Giovanni a cardinal when the boy was thirteen years old.[20] Relative to the level of nepotism and pluralism of the curia, Innocent's secular

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[12] Ryder, "The Papal States," 575.
[13] Aubenas, "The Papacy and the Catholic Church," 78.
[14] Aubenas, "The Papacy and the Catholic Church," 77.
[15] The practice of selling ecclesiastical offices (or immunity) is known as "simony"; pluralism, or the holding multiple offices by one individual, was common at this time. Ryder, "The Papal States," 586.
[16] Allen, "Innocent VIII, Pope," 237.
[17] Mallett, "The Northern Italian States," 567.
[18] Baumgartner, *Behind Locked Doors,* 83.
[19] Baumgartner, *Behind Locked Doors,* 83.
[20] This cardinalship was kept secret for a time due to his young age. Kelly, "Innocent VIII."

alliances and selling of offices do not make him an outlier. At the same time, these acts are not balanced by many great successes, which serves to highlight his corruption.

Innocent's affability and political weaknesses stand in contrast to his feelings towards heresy. Whether they be witches or Waldensians, he aggressively acted against those he considered to be enemies of the faith.[21] Innocent, for example, ordered that religious literature be controlled by bishops in 1487.[22] He and other religious leadership sought to prevent biblical interpretation by laypeople out of fears that this vernacular reading would breed heresy, perhaps because they saw it as a threat to the church's power.[23] Innocent primarily targeted the Hussites and the Waldensians, who had long been persecuted for heresy, and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), a philosopher. This period also saw the renewal of organized witch-hunting and anti-heretical rhetoric, which increasingly associated heretical groups and satanic witch cults. This continuity from hunting heretics to hunting witches helps place Innocent's papal bull of 1484 in context, explaining its inclusion with a treatise on recognizing and trying witches, the *Malleus maleficarum* (1486/7). Despite the rising fears of witchcraft, there were relatively few people executed for heresy at this time.[24] While those who "obstinately or repeatedly confessed" to heresy could be sentenced to death, it was not uncommon for individuals to renounce the beliefs of which they were accused for their own protection.[25]

Pico della Mirandola was a syncretistic philosopher; he believed he could show the truth inherent in the knowledge or beliefs of any religious or philosophical tradition.[26] Perhaps even more controversially, he believed humans were created with such capacity that they could "even

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[21] Allen, "Innocent VIII, Pope," 237.
[22] Ocker, "The Bible in the Fifteenth Century," 485.
[23] Ocker, "The Bible in the Fifteenth Century," 484.
[24] Cameron, *Interpreting Christian History*, 75
[25] Cameron, *Interpreting Christian History*, 75.
[26] Gosselin, "Syncretism in the West," 1194.

become a Godlike creator by [their] use of Hermetic divinatory magic and [their] own consequent creation of statues that move."[27] Some scholars consider learned magic to have reached its climax with thinkers like Pico.[28] In 1486, Innocent prohibited the reading of Pico's propositions, threatening execution to those that did not abide by the ban.[29] Young Pico planned for Pope Innocent to preside over a public debate in 1487 over his 900 theses, but this did not occur.[30] Instead, the church deemed over a dozen of his theses heretical, and Pico fled to France. Lorenzo de'Medici later arranged his return to Italy. Pico largely wrote commentaries on the Psalms upon his return.[31]

The Waldensians were an ascetic heretical group started in twelfth-century France. Despite continued persecution, they survived thanks to their comfort with renouncing their heretical beliefs if they were under threat.[32] Accusations of Satan worship came early to Waldensians, with anti-Waldensian preachers in the French Alps expressing concerns about a supposed rise of Satanism by the end of the fourteenth century.[33] One inquisitor was recorded "arresting Waldensian heretics in the 1420s, and arresting witches a decade later in the same region."[34] The high number of supposed witches in the alpine regions was directly connected to the Waldensian population living there.[35] In response, Innocent issued a bull calling for the extermination of the Waldensians in 1487.[36] The Hussites received similar treatment to the

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[27] Gosselin, "Syncretism in the West," 1196.
[28] Schwerhoff, "Magic, Sorcery, Witchcraft."
[29] The first "banned book"; Campbell, "Innocent VIII."
[30] Brach, "Mathematical Esotericism," 75.
[31] Gosselin, "Syncretism in the West," 1194.
[32] Frassetto, "Waldensians (Waldenses)."
[33] Rapp, "Religious Belief and Practice," 219.
[34] Monter, "The Mediterranean Inquisitions," 284.
[35] Cameron, "Enchanted Europe," 238.
[36] Campbell, "Innocent VIII."

Waldensians.[37] Early in the fifteenth century, the Hussites shifted their emphasis to an "explicit condemnation of an irredeemably corrupt church."[38] It follows, then, that Innocent worked to stop Hussites from worshipping in Bohemia, a large and influential kingdom within the Holy Roman Empire.[39] Heinrich Kramer, the author of the *Malleus maleficarum,* himself hunted Hussites. In 1467, early in his career as an inquisitor, he was given papal authority to combat Hussites in the Holy Roman Empire, including the Kingdom of Bohemia.[40]

The *Summis desiderantes affectibus*, issued in 1484, was both a fulfillment of Henrich Kramer's request for the authority to act as inquisitor and hunt witches, and an official recognition of the existence of witches and their behavior.[41] There is debate among scholars as to the motivations behind the bull's publication. This bull was a "classic example of an increasing willingness on the part of some authorities to act against people accused of witchcraft."[42] One historian suggests that its issuance was politically motivated, signaling a conflict of jurisdiction between clergy and secular leaders.[43] Another suggested motivation is money; responding to requests like Kramer's was a major source of revenue for the curia.[44]

The *Summis desiderantes affectibus* states that many Germans have made deals with the devil, and it lists the behaviors of these supposed witches. These behaviors include killing human and animal fetuses, ruining crops, making both people and animals ill, rendering men sexually impotent and women unable to conceive, and rejecting the Christian faith. The bull reaffirms the

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[37] Followers of Jan Hus (1369-1415), a Bohemian (modern-Czech Republic) "proto-protestant" reformer burnt at the stake for heresy. Martin Luther would incorporate many of Hus' beliefs into his *Ninety-five Theses* in 1517.
[38] Deane, *A History of Medieval Heresy and Inquisition*, 210.
[39] Weber, "Pope Innocent VIII."
[40] Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, 12.
[41] Papal bulls are public decrees of a pope, named for the elaborate seals appended to validate/authenticate their papal authority.
[42] Darst, "Witchcraft in Spain," 298.
[43] Darst, "Witchcraft in Spain," 298.
[44] Senner, "How Henricus Institoris became Inquisitor," 402.

authority of Kramer and Jacob Sprenger to act freely as inquisitors. They had been challenged by local authorities who believed Kramer and Sprenger did not have permission to work in their region and did not believe there were witches present. Further, the inquisitors are granted the power to preach whenever they would like, and to question, accuse, and punish any individual for witchcraft, regardless of that person's background. Those who stood in the way would face excommunication and the wrath of God.

At the time of the bull's publication, belief in witches and fears of Satan worship were widespread. Christians had a real obsession with demons.[45] Rhetoric also suggested that various heretical groups were banding together to fight Christendom as a united Satanic force.[46] Earlier, in the fourteenth century, there had been a growing belief that it was impossible for someone to genuinely convert their faith.[47] Clergy sought to end the observance of superstitious customs that were increasingly seen as heretical; some inquisitors believed practitioners were not acting out of ignorance of the Bible, but because they were disciples of Satan.[48] It was suggested that the resilience of superstitious beliefs could be caused by the "devil blocking the path of true religion."[49] One scholar writes that a "gradual accumulation of signs" of the end times (the plague, the schism) may have contributed to this fear of demons and led to anti-heretical actions.[50] The papal bull of 1484, rather than introducing new ideas about witchcraft, instead made official ideas that were already widely known and believed.[51]

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[45] Boreau, "Demons and the Christian Community," 432.
[46] Arnold, "Repression and Power," 359.
[47] Jews were the primary targets in this growing doubt in the possibility of conversion. Boreau, "Demons and the Christian Community," 432.
[48] Rapp, "Religious Belief and Practice," 218.
[49] Rapp, "Religious Belief and Practice," 218.
[50] Boreau, "Demons and the Christian Community," 432.
[51] Bailey, "Battling Demons," 2.

The bull was included in the first several pages of Heinrich Kramer's *Malleus maleficarum*. Kramer published it without permission from the pope, perhaps because he believed it would help to legitimize the rest of the text. The bull itself did not produce the effect of a wave of witch-hunting fervor that Kramer wished it to have. He was not particularly successful in his role as inquisitor, even with papal authorization. Following unsuccessful wars with multiple Italian States, "papal authority" meant "nothing in the greater cities," and this weakening of authority was also apparent in other areas of church land.[52] It is perhaps ironic that Kramer originally intended to shore up his work with the pope's implied approval considering the status of the church, reputation of Innocent VIII, and the popularity of the *Malleus*.

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[52] Ryder, "Papal States," 585.

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