**Familiars**

Non - Pagan history describes familiars as low - ranking demons in constant attention to Witches for the purpose of carrying out spells and bewitchments. Familiars usually assumed animal forms - cats, toads, owls, mice and dogs seem to have been the most common - though virtually any animal or insect could be suspected.

Outside of Witch trials, more benevolent familiars were believed to exist, serving Wizards and wise men (and women) who were magicians or village healers. The familiars helped diagnose illnesses and the sources of bewitchment and were used for divining and finding lost objects and treasures. Some familiars were said to be Fairies. Oberon was a popular name for fairy familiars in 15th and 16th century in England.

Many modern Witches have animal familiars, usually cats, which are their magical helpers. Some also have dogs, birds, snakes or toads. Witches do not believe the familiars are "demons" or spirits in animal form but simply animals whose psychic attunement makes them ideal partners in magical workings. Some Witches say that it is possible to endow pets with magical powers and turn them into familiars, though others don't believe it should be done. Still others believe familiars are never "pets" (and should never be treated as such) but are animals that volunteer to work as familiars and are Karmically attracted to Witches. Witches who do not have familiars send out psychic calls" to draw the right animal.

Familiars reputedly are sensitive to psychic vibrations and power and are welcomed partners inside the magic circle and other magical work. They also serve as psychic radar, reacting visibly to the presence of any negative or evil energy, whether it is an unseen force or a person who dabbles in the wrong kind of magic. Familiars are also given psychic protection by their Witches. Some Witches it seems also use the term familiar to describe thought - forms created magically and empowered to carry out a certain task on the astral plane.

Bees

According to many demonologists, if a witch or sorceress managed to eat a queen bee before she was arrested, she would be able to withstand torture and trial without confessing. This was one of many ready explanations offered by witch - hunters when their victims refused to confess. In this way, many witches were condemned to death despite the lack of a confession.

Chickens

A chicken named Nan was considered a familiar in the 17th - century Bury St. Edmonds trials of Suffolk, England. Three other chickens were also cited as imps in the same area.

Crows

Sooty - feathered and harsh of voice, the crow was a fit familiar to witches, prized for its ability to fly and spy. Villagers feared this carrion eater, for it was a messenger of mortality. A fluttering crow around the window or one that flew thrice over the roof, croaking each time, meant Death was on his way. Simply to see the bird flying alone could bring bad luck, and crows rising in a flock from a wood sometimes presaged famine.

Flies

Margaret Wyard, an accused witch of Bury St. Edmonds in Suffolk, England, confessed to having flies among her familiars.

Hares

In ways both physical and behavioral, the hare was a natural ally of witches: Hares are swift and agile, able to stand on their hind legs like a person, prone to gathering in parliament like groups,

orgiastically mad in the spring, wantonly destructive of crops and possessed of a most unbeast like cry. Some witches traveled in the shape of hares.

Given the association of hares with witchcraft and magic, it is not surprising that superstition surrounded them. It was said, for example, that the sight of a hare running down a village street presaged fire and that the appearance of a white hare in a mine would be followed by a fatal accident. A hare that crossed a person's path would bring bad luck. And the very word 'hare' could not be mentioned at sea, so great was the fear of the animal's power.

Curiously enough, possession of a hare's - foot brought luck. This belief arose not from the hare's traffic with witches but from much more ancient associations: The hare is a notably prolific creature, and its foot was long a sexual symbol.

Mice

Margaret Wyard, an accused witch of Bury St. Edmonds in Suffolk, England, confessed to having mice among her familiars. Other witches in the area admitted to having two "heavy and hairy" mice as familiars. In 1662, the nine - and eleven - year old daughters of Samuel Pacy somehow saw invisible mice, which they threw on a fire. One mouse "screeched like a Rat." The other mouse "Flashed like to Gun - Powder." One 16th - century Essex woman confessed to having three mouse - shaped imps named Daynty, Prettyman, and Littleman. Another woman had four named Sparrow, Robyn, James, and Prickeare.

Snails

A victim of Matthew Hopkins and John Stearne, John Bysack confessed to having six familiars in the form of snails. These imps sustained themselves by sucking Bysack's blood. "Each snail was an assassin with a particular assignment: Atleward killed cows, Jeffry pigs, Peter sheep, Pyman fowls, Sacar horses and Sydrake Christians."

Snakes and Cats

Anciently inimical to each other, the serpent and the cat were favorites of witches. The serpent seems to have played the smaller role: While it could serve as a familiar, it was chiefly valued for its fearful aspect and its link to Satan - useful in repelling the curious, who might interfere with a witch's business. To dream of a serpent signified that someone had a grudge against the dreamer.

The cat, on the other hand, was surrounded by speculation. Its pupils - narrow slits in the daytime and luminous black globes at night – linked it to the moon and emphasized its power to see into the future. Cats were said to suck the breath from infants at night. And cats forecast the weather: When they scampered and cavorted, wind was on its way; when they washed their ears, rain was coming; when they sat with their backs to the fire, they awaited frost and storms.

Except in northern England, where it was thought lucky to own a black cat (but unlucky to meet a strange one), black cats were the most common embodiments of Satan. As for cats that served as familiars - rather than as transformations of the witches themselves - they were usually brindled.

Spiders

Spinner of webs, an archtrickster, and a silent and murderous trapper, the spider was tiny enough to hide in the hood of a witch's cloak as a familiar and whisper instructions in her ear.

Ordinary folk said that to dream of a spider meant betrayal. To see one in the morning brought bad luck, and to kill one summoned rain. The sight of spiders terrified wedding parties because the creatures were omens of unhappy marriage. And in Switzerland it was said that the plague, with its black sores, was spread by malevolent spiders travelling in secret from house to house.

Toads

Ugly and venomous thought it was, the toad seems to have been among the most cherished of witch familiars: The creatures were dressed in velvet by their mistresses, ornamented with bells and encouraged to dance. Common folk both feared and valued them though. Toads were burned because the horns on their foreheads marked them as agents of Satan and because witches used toad spittle to concoct ointments that conferred invisibility. On the other hand, toads were admired for their ability to hear distant thunder long before the human ear could catch it; the sight of the little creatures making their way to safe water provided a reliable indicator for approaching storms. And very elderly toads - rarely glimpsed - carried precious jewels in their heads, effective antidotes to poison.