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## Petronilla de Meath

**John Aberth:** Hello. I'm John Aberth, historian of the late Middle Ages. Petronilla de Meath became, in 1324, the first woman in Ireland to be burned at the stake for the crime of witchcraft, which at the time was equated with heresy. She served as a maid to Lady Alice Kyteler, who was one of the earliest targets of witchcraft accusations, centuries before the more famous rash of witch trials in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although Kyteler was able to flee the bishop's clutches and spent the rest of her life in England, Petronilla was not so lucky. In the context of *The Dinner Party*, Petronilla serves as an emblem of the many women tried and convicted of witchcraft during the Middle Ages. This place setting employs many familiar symbols of witchcraft from both Petronilla's time and today, such as the broomstick incorporated into the illuminated letter *P* on the front of the runner. The red cords lining the black front edge evoke the red witch's garter, which in some contexts signified higher rank in the coven. Petronilla's plate incorporates other symbols associated with witchcraft, including a bell, a book, and a candle. The cauldron is meant to represent both the Great Mother, to whom some modern witches pay honor, and the meeting place of covens. According to the artist, the flames that envelop the center of the plate are "an inversion of the sacred fire that once burned in honor of the Goddess." Grouped around Petronilla's place setting are the names of other women caught in the witch-hunt mayhem, a period in European history in which women's status was undergoing a profound transformation.

*For more information about these objects, be sure to visit [www.brooklynmuseum.org](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org)*