



Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath

Carlo Ginzburg , Raymond Rosenthal (Translator)

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Weaving early accounts of witchcraft—trial records, ecclesiastical tracts, folklore, and popular iconography—into new and startling patterns, Carlo Ginzburg presents in *Ecstasies* compelling evidence of a hidden shamanistic culture that flourished across Europe and in England for thousands of years.

Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath Details

Date : Published June 14th 2004 by University of Chicago Press (first published 1989)

ISBN : 9780226296937

Author : Carlo Ginzburg , Raymond Rosenthal (Translator)

Format : Paperback 368 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Witchcraft, Religion, Folklore



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From Reader Review Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath for online ebook

Tintaglia says

4.5

Clivemichael says

Not your typical bedtime reader, I'm tempted to lift the effusive accolades from the book's back cover. Instead I'll note it is a densely documented, dissertation on the extreme likelihood of a universal link to ancient cultural ancestry, carrying forward similar mythology, folklore and shamanic themes. Who knew history could be so fascinating? Apparently Carlo Ginzburg. I have never seen the like of his footnotes! He skillfully, gently and with an obvious delight extracts from a veritable academic haystack a needle of truth and erudite conjecture that has me hooked forever on historic research as a hobby. Too late to make it a career. What were they thinking at the Ministry of Education when they created such an abysmal History curriculum? Perhaps my age is showing...

Jonfaith says

What we have tried to analyze here is not one narrative among many, but the matrix of all possible narratives.

So concludes this Triumph of the Weird. What a Borgesian proclamation! My head spins with the density and erudition displayed in this ethnohistory of an idea, the Sabbath. This was a perfect book to roll around with for two days, discouraged from leaving the house by winter break and true winter weather. So Dr. Ginzburg ponders why Witch Trials all sounded similar across three centuries and throughout Europe. He pokes and ponders, parses and sifts until he finds that mushrooms are the answer. Sorry for the spoiler. Such was disseminated thousands of years ago by the Scythians and their travels both east and west. Throughout which such totems found themselves everywhere in folklore: all ceremony and symbolism trace back to that Eurasian jaunt. I suspect The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth is a similar wormhole. One could grow fat and die on the footnotes alone. The elegance of the etymology is worth the price of admission.

J.M. Hushour says

Does much of European apprehensions and lore about the supernatural derive from a remote Eurasian substratum of possibly shamanic beliefs and rites, dating back to Paleolithic times?

Ginzburg sure makes a goddamn good argument for it. To his credit, though, even when he spirals down rabbit-holes of morphology and metaphor and symbol, which largely prove his thesis right, at least incidentally, he still has the verve to pull back from catechizing his own thesis.

This book should fascinate pretty much everybody. The skinny: stuff like witches, sabbaths, shapeshifting, hell, even freaking Cinderella, all manifest commonly across much of Eurasia and in early modern times, during witch interrogations and the inquisition some tantalizing little nuances in testimony give a window into a long world, vanished but extant if only literally in dreams. How do benandanti of the Friuli and Livonian werewolves have the same experience battling evil sorcerers and sorceresses for the fertility of their crops come together? What is the connection of "the good folk", followers of a nocturnal goddess who, if unblindfolded will basically destroy the world with all sorts of other good folk, faeries, sprites, Thor, Oedipus, and shit as far afield as China!?! If you want to know the answers to those things, this is probably the book for you. Insane and endlessly fascinating.

Ari Eris says

Ginzburg's thesis provides some tasty food for thought. His argument is strongest when confined to Europe and interpreting Roman- and Medieval-era texts. When he moves eastward, however, he lost me a bit, and I found Part 3, Chapter 2, "Skin and Bones" difficult to follow. Overall I'm intrigued but skeptical of his conclusions and not clear on his methodology but believe that this book raises new and interesting questions about witchcraft in the Middle Ages. Fancy stuff.

Trey Wentworth says

An important resource referred to by a number of more recent authors on the connections between Witchcraft and Germanic Tradition (Lecouteux, De Vries), Carlo Ginzburg's seminal work has some extremely valuable accounts of witch and werewolf traditions throughout the continent. Unfortunately, he seems to have a limited view of their origins (selectively ignoring the Germanic evidence he himself presents in favor of a Celtic substrate), and treads close to the trap that Murray fell headlong into in the 20's in attempting to synthesize too wide a range of evidence (geographically and temporally), edging into the realm of pure conjecture.

Overall, an extremely important work that I am glad to have read; several segments of Part II, I am certain I will refer back to for the primary sources, but overall, I do not think I will be sitting down to reread Ginzburg's entire work again.

Erik Graff says

Erudite, dense, wide-ranging and provocative, Ginzburg's *Ecstasies* begins as an investigation of the beliefs of witches in early modern Europe and ends, after many digressive speculations spanning human history across the globe, with the tentative conclusion that common prehistoric shamanistic practices have had a pervasive and enduring influence on folk beliefs and religion throughout most of Eurasia.

Having read Ginzburg before, I bought this with some (disappointed) expectation of delving more deeply into European witchcraft. Indeed, the author does begin with an examination of the phenomenon, but most of the book travels far afield from its starting point. Still, the starting point--getting at the beliefs of those accused of witchcraft themselves--is interesting.

Most studies of witchcraft have focused on the record, records kept by inquisitors and persecutors, treating the accused either as poor, deluded individuals or as practitioners of pre-Christian religions (a thesis commonly identified with Margaret Murray). Ginzburg, however, believes that by separating out of the record assertions not fitting the expectations of the persecuting authorities one can approach some sense of what the "witches" themselves believed. To some extent, in the first couple of chapters, he does just this, but this just provides a point from which he can cast his net--widely.

Again and again the text comes back to questions of transmission. Do the common beliefs he treats result from diffusion, from derivation from a common source or "from structural characteristics of the human mind" (p.213)? Insofar as he comes down to any side, he tends toward the second alternative, supplemented by diffusion and common sociological factors such as gender roles. The Jungian hypothesis of a collective unconscious is dismissed not so much for being false as for being inherently vague and undemonstrable. One sideline of his argument, the notion that the use of naturally occurring psychedelic agents was common (an hypothesis which might lend some weight to the Jungian), is only treated briefly and inconclusively at the very end of the text.

Although I was mightily impressed by the scholarship embodied in this book and in its copious notes, I was ultimately left unsatisfied. The shamanistic argument is an old and familiar one, itself open to accusations of nebulous vagueness. In the end this book is most valuable as a somewhat rambling case study of how such research into origins might proceed and what considerations ought accompany such.

Tina Estep says

This is by far one of my favorite books and I still refer to it in my research. This book is an ethnohistory of the beliefs and practices of the early accounts of witchcraft throughout Europe and England from the time of the Inquisition . He goes through trial records, folklore, and popular iconography that form patterns and is evidence of a hidden witchcraft cultures that have been present for thousands of years.

Great, great, great book! Again another percepective of witchcraft, but this time through the eyes of those being accused. The trial records that Ginzburg presents are the written accounts of what was said by those being accused, accounts of those who were prosecuting, and what became of those accused from the time they were arrested to when they were sentenced. These accounts were patterns that Ginzburg traces throughout Europe.

XPHAIEA. says

At times brilliant, at times far reaching and too dense to follow easily - this is Ginzburg's masterpiece. A dizzying exploration of the origins of the Sabbath. Ginzburg traces the intricacies back to Paleolithic shamanism and the ecstasies of the title. The connecting threads he explores include animal transformations, birth with a caul, and lameness which are all seen as being a mythic link to the passage between life and death.

I was fascinated by the theory that the witch persecutions originated in the persecution of lepers and other heretics, which no other book on witchcraft I have read to this date has mentioned.

Ginzburg explores the Goddess/Fertility cult/s as well as a gigantic sprawling section 'Skin and Bones' on related myths/fables/fairytales which was so sprawling, it lost me completely at times.

Compelling and an incredible range of research - but ultimately a lot of the content is grasping at straws. We can never know exactly why there are so many linking myths and similarities. Whilst some important and unique points were made, I felt the range of sources was too far ranging, it ended with some very vague conclusions, which ultimately felt rather unsatisfactory...

Sceox says

A good friend with impeccable taste recommended me CG's *Ecstasies* in the context of a conversation about a pair of books that will be familiar to some: *Caliban and the Witch* and *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture*. (If I recall correctly, *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan!* was also mentioned.) Ginzburg's book will never get the kind of circulation that the others have had, which is to our great disadvantage. While far less transparently political than Federici or Evans, Ginzburg is the only true historian among them. I mean "true historian" not in the sense of upholding truth as the ideal and object of historical studies, but in these three senses: vocation (history is his life's work), faithfulness (his cautiousness and skepticism are exemplary), and most importantly Benjamin's sense (he goes about his work as if it is the dead themselves who are at stake).

This last point deserves elaboration beyond what I'll attempt here, as this book is deeply and finally about the dead. The introduction concludes: "The attempt to attain knowledge of the past is also a journey into the world of the dead." If this is reminiscent of Benjamin's theses on history, I wouldn't consider it accidental. Buried among the book's thousand-odd footnotes one finds: "It should be remembered that Benjamin, in a letter to Scholem on August 5, 1937, said that he considered Jung's psychology 'the devil's work through and through, which should be attacked with white magic'." Here CG's opposition to Jung seems to be twofold: on the one hand, Jung's psychology would sever archetypes from being rooted in the body, on the other, it expresses supposed cultural universals from a Eurocentric perspective. In any case, the reference to Benjamin may be a clue to Ginzburg's interest in "the dark side of history", involving the people whose stories have been wiped out or distorted by their enemies, whose subterranean, mutated legacies demand that the historian become a detective of the past, a journeyer into the world of the dead.

One oversight leaves me wondering. CG has expertly traced threads from the beliefs and ritual practices of the witches to the shamans of the northern steppes, the werewolves, and the cults of Dionysus, among others. These threads consist of elements (animal transformations, birth with a caul, lameness, times of the year or day, etc) united by their mythic link to the passage between life and death. I wonder if we could include among these elements the shamans' trans-sexual and transvestite practices (which CG mentions in passing), also a marker of liminality, and also practiced in at least some of the other groups he deals with so closely. CG does not comment on this.

Yacoob says

Ginzburg za t?i hv?zdy nem?že, to ten p?eklad :/

Knížka se moc špatn? a stavba v?ty ?eštinu p?ipomíná jen díky ohýbání slov; jinak je to v podstat? google

translate. Což je škoda, téma sabatu je samo o sobě velmi zajímavé, byť náročné na background a odborné povědomí. I laik by si nicméně mohl poříst, kdyby se zde pracovalo s překladatelskou poznámkou a autor (překlada) by si dal tu práci a pro čtenáře dohledal vysvětlení odborných termínů, souvisejících vědeckých teorií a některých méně známých faktů. Což se bohužel neděje.

Škoda promarněné příležitosti, Ginzburg patří rozhodně k tomu lepšímu, co současná historiografie nabízí. Každopádně o důvod víc konečně se dokopat k té učebnici italštiny, co se mi válí už pár let v knihovně :)

Tor.com Publishing says

THIS is how I like my historical speculation. Couched in caveats & supported by as much back data as possible. Carlo Ginzburg's "microhistorical" paradigm is a fascinating game of telephone. The armchair anthropologist in me thrilled at it, & that's before the weird "Injury to Foot" motif bits. --MK

Alexandre De Chiara says

Carlo Ginzburg me pegou pela mão e me levou pra conhecer bosques e florestas intocados pelo cristianismo. O coração selvagem dos rituais xamânicos e das lendas esquecidas que habitam até hoje o subconsciente humano. Ele avança por essas paragens esquecidas com energia e bom humor, e recolhe peça a peça o caminho que a imaginação humana fez para desenhar algumas de suas figuras mais antigas. Intrigante e glorioso. Recomendo

Steve Cran says

Records of the witches Sabbat reaches us in modern times through the stores and testimonies recorded by the biased inquisitors who tortured the suspected witches to get a confession from them. Historians looking for the origin of these sabbats and trying to prove their veracity have come up against many challenges. Some have thought the Sabbat to be nothing but invention of the inquisitors while others have believed that there was a factual basis to the reported Sabbat.

According to legend the witches Sabbat was when the witchers would anoint themselves with flying ointment and would ride a broomstick or an animal and fly to the Sabbat for frolicking with the devil. Now through out European history groups like the lepers, Jews and witches have been accused of poisoning wells, spreading plagues and eating live babies for rituals. The same accusations are repeated time and time again the only things that changes is the name of the group being accused.

Going back though historical memory there have been recorded night wandering with a Goddess called Diana or Herodia, Richella, or Oriente. She would lead a procession through the night stopping at houses to eat or drink if it was clean and offering were left for the riding company. She would have in her procession all sorts of followers, faeries and later on Demons. Now the Goddess occurred only in an area with a Celtic substratum. Places that were Norse or strictly Roman did not have this Goddess flying around.

Another source for this Sabbat or ecstasy would come groups like the Benadanti, Kressinski and Calusary. Based in Italy, Central Europe, and parts of Eurasia these dream warriors had the ability to shape shift into other animals, mostly wolves. The wolves or werewolves would fight against malevolent forces of the universe like witches and vampire in order to preserve the fertility of the land. Some like the Calusari followed Diana while others claimed to be servants of the Lord Jesus Christ like the Benadanti.

Some times there were groups of warriors who would fight for their town on the Astral plane to benefit their village against a rival village. These tendencies tended to show up all over the place going from Europe, Eurasia all the way to china. The converging point comes from the Scythians who passed amny of these things on to Celtic Europeans and greeks. The Greeks had their ecstatic cult of Dionysus and the Eleusinian mysteries. The Scythians also had a goddess that was mistress of the beasts. Could this have passed on to the celts somehow and then to the rest of Europe.

The author then goes into the differing mythologies and makes note of how shamans had to have a near death experience and were often lamed in the foot somehow that marked them off. It was Shaman who did the healing and the fighting and the shapreshifting.

This book was fascinating. Carlo Ginzburg is not a neo-pagan or some wishy washy Wiccan he is a scholar and his work is based on solid research. Neo-Pagans should read material of this caliber.

Jacob van Berkel says

Hate to give this only one star, because it's such a magisterial piece of historiography and such a fascinating subject, but, my god, it was dry as bone, later to be resurrected or otherwise, and it really sucked the life out of me over the course of the weeks it took me to read this. I truly hated every minute of reading it, right from the godawful introduction.
