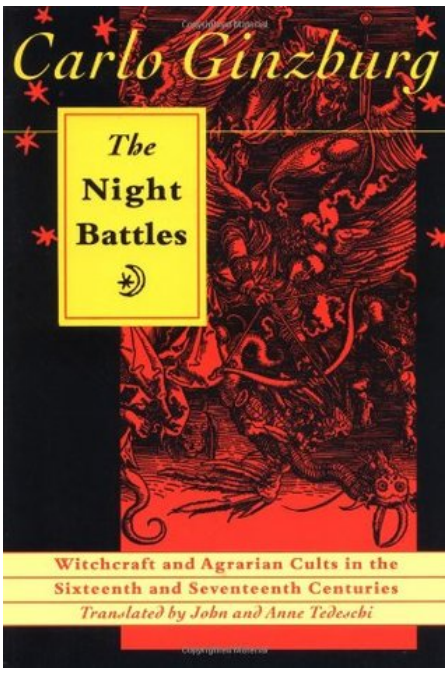

The Night Battles: Witchcraft & Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth & Seventeenth Centuries

Carlo Ginzburg , John Tedeschi (Translator) , Anne Tedeschi (Translator)

The Night Battles: Witchcraft & Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth & Seventeenth Centuries

Carlo Ginzburg , John Tedeschi (Translator) , Anne Tedeschi (Translator)

The Night Battles: Witchcraft & Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth & Seventeenth Centuries Carlo Ginzburg , John Tedeschi (Translator) , Anne Tedeschi (Translator)

Based on research in the Inquisitorial archives, the book recounts the story of a peasant fertility cult centred on the benandanti. These men and women regarded themselves as professional anti-witches, who (in dream-like states) apparently fought ritual battles against witches and wizards, to protect their villages and harvests. If they won, the harvest would be good, if they lost, there would be famine. The inquisitors tried to fit them into their pre-existing images of the witchesâ?? sabbat. The result of this cultural clash which lasted over a century, was the slow metamorphosis of the benandanti into their enemies â?? the witches. Carlo Ginzburg shows clearly how this transformation of the popular notion of witchcraft was manipulated by the Inquisitors, and disseminated all over Europe and even to the New World. The peasantsâ?? fragmented and confused testimony reaches us with great immediacy, enabling us to identify a level of popular belief which constitutes a valuable witness for the reconstruction of the peasant way of thinking of this age.

The Night Battles: Witchcraft & Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth & Seventeenth Centuries Details

Date	:	Published March 1st 1992 by Johns Hopkins University Press (first published 1966)
ISBN	:	9780801843860
Author	:	Carlo Ginzburg , John Tedeschi (Translator) , Anne Tedeschi (Translator)
Format	:	Paperback 232 pages
Genre	:	History, Nonfiction, Witchcraft, Religion, Folklore, European History

From Reader Review The Night Battles: Witchcraft & Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth & Seventeenth Centuries for online ebook

Valorie says

In The Night Battles, Carlo Ginzburg looks at a small group of northeastern Italian people from the area of Friuli who claimed to be 'benandanti.' The benandanti, according to their legend, were people born with "the caul," and battled witches to protect the harvest and people, and to heal people bewitched. A second strand of benandanti claimed to be witness to processions of the dead. Using a small set of inquisition documents to do his microhistory, Ginzburg claims that he can reconstruct the progression of benandanti identity from their perspective from those who battle witches to those who are witches. This new identity was imposed, according to Ginzburg, by the inquisitors who used leading questions and other devices such as fear to convince the accused benandanti into altering their confessions to fit the new model of witchcraft, which can be traced through the confession transcripts. The book contains four chapters and an appendix with a few of the transcripts included for reference. Chapter one introduces the benandanti, their beliefs, and the inquisitors; chapter two describes the benandanti who associate with the dead and traces possible links of origin; chapter three returns to the benandanti and the inquisitors, and to the evolution of the benandanti identity; and chapter four sees the conclusion of the benandanti fitting themselves into the accepted mold of witchcraft. There is no way Ginzburg can support, with his available evidence, what the true intentions of the benandanti were when they confessed to witchcraft practices. Was it that they became convinced of their own evil, or simply became indoctrinated out of fear and insistence to change stories to fit what they knew the inquisitors wanted regardless of what they knew to be truth? There is simply no way to know if the benandanti were only saying what they felt needed to be said, or if they actually accepted it as truth. Ginzburg does, unfortunately, make a lot of claims that cannot be substantiated. For example, he tells the story of a woman named Anna la Rossa who he admits never claimed to be a benandanti (35). Yet later on, Ginzburg refers to her as one of the benandanti (41 & 43) without ever proving that she was one. If anything, Ginzburg is merely reasserting that many different beliefs had origins in the same pagan traditions, or that ideas filtered through geographical space. In another case, Ginzburg claims that the trances during which benandanti left their bodies were ointment induced or caused by illness (59). Again, this is not something he can adequately support and therefore cannot state it as unquestionable. Regardless of this, Ginzburg's greatest achievements are two. First, he does a good job in his outlining of the various pagan traditional origins of witchcraft and other cults. Second, he has great success in showing how the inquisitorial process was able to impose beliefs with such effectiveness that people would admit to them even when they knew giving the answer that was desired would surely bring harm to them. It sheds light on the nature of the witch hunts and trials, and the confessions rendered.

John Wiswell says

In the 16th and 17th century a small group of people believed they left their bodies to fight in an astral war on behalf of God. Whether they were insane, mistaken or somehow right, the Church saw them as Satanists. This book is a terribly interesting examination of how the Church trampled individual spirituality and attempted to explain Pagan experiences with its own cosmology and morality. Carlo Ginzburg's research is distilled into very readable and accessible prose.

---

icaro says

quando vedo su un banco di libreria uno di quei tomi di centinaia di pagine, con titoli a sensazione e copertine a tinte forti che pretendono di spiegare che cosa sia stata la stregoneria, mi viene il nervoso e penso a Carlo Ginzburg.
In questo libro, circa 250 pagine di piccolo formato, il più originale storico modernista italiano in attività, ricostruisce una vicenda di ritualità magica, senza fronzoli, ma con grande rigore filologico.
E' stato il primo a ri-scoprire questi tipetti dei benandanti e poi molti ne hanno approffittato ma, a mio giudizio, l'originale resta sempre il migliore.
Uno di quei lavori dai quali si può evincere che la storiografia seria forse è un "mattone", ma non è mai una palla.

John says

This was so cool. It only took an afternoon or so to read, and I have been thinking about it ever since. Really interesting stuff. It has the perennial problem that microhistories tend to have - is any of this really applicable to anything, or is this just a minor little neat corner of history - but it does get one thinking.
Night Battles is about a small society of people discovered and investigated by the religious authorities; a people who shared a bizarre set of spiritual beliefs. In the late sixteenth century, a number of peasants who referred to themselves as benandanti began to attract the notice of inquisitors in northern Italy. These men, and a few women, claimed to have a special calling because they had been born with a caul – a piece of membrane which sometimes covers a newborn’s face at birth. The benandanti saw themselves as anti-witches, and soldiers of a sort, dedicated to identifying witches, curing their victims, and generally serving their communities against the forces of evil. One common belief was particularly extreme – a man named Moduco, addressing the inquisitors in 1580, explained it:
"I am a benandanti because I go with the others to fight four times a year, that is during the Ember Days, at night; I go invisibly in spirit and the body remains behind; we go forth in the service of Christ…[we fight the witches of the devil] we with bundles of fennel and they with sorghum stalks."
Many other self-proclaimed benandanti made identical claims, right down to the fennel and sorghum. They insisted that they were good Christians. They claimed that they were fighting to defend the harvest, and that if they lost to the witches the crops would fail.
Fighting witches with fennel stalks! That is amazing. To the inquisitors, however, there were good Christians, and there were people who were magically transported to nighttime gatherings, and one could not possibly fall into both categories. The peasants were insistent – they were not witches, they fought witches for Christ. Over decades of repeated cases, however, the church managed to combine ideas about benandanti with ideas about witches, and in the public mind the two groups started to be indistinguishable. Examining this process, Ginzburg argues, may help us understand how ideas and definitions of witchcraft came to be codified. The benandanti may provide a “new approach to the problem of the popular origins of witchcraft.”
Anyway. So cool. Apparently there were some people in Northern Europe who made similar claims, except they said they were werewolves who fought witches for the harvest. Crazy! It's like every historian's dream, to find some nutty little group like this to write a book about.

---

marie says

Docela jsem se na tuhle knížku t?šila, i když je op?t - šokující - zahrnuta v mé povinné literatu?e. N?které

momenty m? bavily, ovšem neustálé opakování toho, co jsou benandanti, procesy s nimi, kde vyslýchaný ?íkal více mén? to samé, co ten p?edchozí... To bylo unavující. Celá kniha je v podstat? soubor proces? s benandanty/?arod?jnicemi a to je vše. :)

Sally says

I managed 80 pages. And it IS interesting...I should imagine the author must have got quite immersed in transcribing the 16th century inquisitorial evidence on the witches of the remote Italian region of Friuli. But there's quite a sameness abouit the allegations, and I abandoned yet another out-of-body experience for something more lowbrow.
Essentially, Ginzburg is considering the strange cult of the Benandanti - a select group of persons (all born in a caul) who, as adults, would be called on to do battle for the forces of good against local witches. Their spirit left the body (a dangerous procedure, as if the body were moved or buried in its absence, they would become unquiet spirits) and went off to engage with warlocks...the baddies armed with sorghum stalks, the Benandanti with fennel. The result meant success (or failure) of the crops.
Of course the reader's immediate query is 'what was going on here?' There's a definite theme throughout the 'vagabonds' 'conversations with the church- and many took place with no torture involved. Ginzburg posits some vague thoughts on hallucinogenic ointments, cataleptic trances and self-induced ecstasies, but there is no answer to why? how? why don't they do it now?
More helpful is his investigation into the origins of the cult...links to various Germanic and Slavonic beliefs, benevolent Livonian werewolves and much more, including a mother-goddess cult based around Diana and a Wild Hunt, imported from the Middle East.
Ginzburg argues that the Benandanti saw themselves as the direct opposite to witches, but that repeated dealings with a disapproving Catholic church conflated the two.
Certainly reading this sends the reader off to google these places where such fabulous stuff happened. And the records bring to life the personalities of the time who would otherwise have disappeared from history...little bits about their lives, finances, families emerge from the documents.
But that's as far as I got...went off for a bit of light relief from Philippa Gregory

---

Michael says

Carlo Ginzburg’s The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries deals with a previously little-known area of early modern European history. Ginzburg explores the case of the benandanti, or “good walkers”, who claimed to fight spirit battles against witches ensuring fruitful croups. Ginzburg argues that the benandanti were the remnants of a pre-Christian, agrarian, fertility cult. Further he claims that the intelligent and deliberate work of the church’s inquisition conformed the benandanti to the standard understanding of witchcraft in European; that is to say participants in diabolical sabbats. The majority of the book takes place in the trial rooms where alleged benandanti claim to fight on the side of the Christian God while facing interrogation that believes otherwise.
In writing this book, Ginzburg hopes to do two different things. First, he intends to add new focus and perspective on the larger issue of “witchcraft and its persecution.” (xvii) Second, he intends to point back to a larger and much older, ancient agricultural and fertility cult that he believes existed throughout central Europe. (xx) This second purpose is touched on cursorily throughout the book, since it would require a scope much larger than he’s already focused on.
Since Ginzburg’s thesis hinges on the active participation of church officials, it is fitting that he primarily

mines records from the inquisitions of the benandanti themselves. From these trials we have the statements of the accused and of the inquisitors, but Ginzburg crafts a narrative in between to add color and emotion. The amount of material Ginzburg found related to such a small sector of history astonishes. In the preface, Ginzburg notes that while there have been somewhat recent investigations into Fruilian popular traditions, they have considered the term "'benandante' as synonymous with 'witch'." He suggests this is because these studies were limited to oral and more recent sources, which would have reflected the conversion of the benandanti to witchcraft that Ginzburg proposes. (xxi)

Concerning itself with a spectacularly specific series of events within a small community, Night Battles acts as a prototype for microhistory; a genre that Ginzburg would help pioneer later in his career. Microhistory responds to the problem of post-modernism's subjective understanding of truth by sufficiently narrowing the historian's scope. Richard D. Brown believes microhistory acts as a "powerful corrective" to "skepticism" and reestablishes history as an "authoritative source of truth." Brown also suggests that the microhistory practiced by Ginzburg attempts to find larger cultural truths from within a microcosm. As we've already seen, Ginzburg claims early on to be exploring the "general problem" of the persecution of witchcraft. (xvii) His investigation into the benandanti, particularly the assimilation of benandanti into the church's perception of witchcraft, is aimed at exploring this larger idea from within the smaller scope of the trials taking place in and around Friuli. In exploring this subject Ginzburg grants some truth to the idea of an ancient pre-Christian, fertility cult originally posited by M. Murray. Unlike Murray, Ginzburg draws a line before trying to divine the practices and composition of this original cult instead pointing to our inability to see through centuries of acculturation. (xix)

Ginzburg organizes Night Battles to show the gradual shift in the benandanti's self perception from a force of good fighting witchcraft to witches themselves. To accomplish this the book is divided into four sections, each divided between smaller topical sections either advancing the narrative or explaining the relevance of previous chapters to Ginzburg's thesis. The book opens with the introduction of the benandanti to the inquisitors, also suggesting links between them and older shamanic practices. The next section explores the connection between the benandanti and people who claimed to have contact with the dead. Here Ginzburg explores various other local superstitious traditions that sometimes intertwined with the practices or believes of the benandanti. The third section returns to the stories of benandanti fighting witches on the Ember Days with Ginzburg suggesting the beginning of a "period of swift, almost violent change." (69) Ginzburg explains this change in a shift of understanding regarding how the benandanti operating with the church officials forcing the accused to either confess some form of allegiance with witches or to admit they were fabricating their tails. Finally, the last section is devoted to the changing beliefs of the benandanti who Ginzburg alleges have come to believe that they are participants in the diabolical sabbat, bringing his thesis to fruition.

Overall Ginzburg has written a thoroughly compelling book that begs the reader to continue turning the page. The captivating narrative directs readers through Ginzburg's arguments and never feels forced. Ginzburg's argument does well with what it is given, but nature of the topic and Ginzburg's methodology hinders his ability to make larger suggestions effectively. For example, the suggestion that the benandanti stem from a larger, ancient cult remains just a suggestion. However, Ginzburg's book still fascinates and has many strong arguments in favor of the rest of his thesis. Ginzburg's fantastic use of sources and methodology make Night Battles an important work for history students to read.

Peter says

Carlo Ginzburg was something of a visionary, which can be both a strength and a liability for a historian. Ginzburg reliably shot well past of the attested historical record in his books. There's little evidence for his

overarching theses, presented here and in undergrad-historiography favorite “The Cheese and the Worms,” about early-modern popular thought. His major claim in “The Night Battles,” that major strains of early modern witchcraft are the continuation of ancient Central European paganism, has been torn apart by the vast majority of other practitioners in the field.

But Ginzburg remains a compelling figure nevertheless. He was the great pioneer of “microhistory,” taking the social history turn of the mid-twentieth century into the nitty-gritty of early modern Italian life and convincing the Vatican to release the records of the Inquisition. These records provided grist for Ginzburg’s mill; every oddball who thought he talked to God, or figured out that the universe was actually like a wormy cheese, or who did good magic to fight the evil magic of witches at night, wound up in front of the Inquisitors at some point, it seems. In this case he follows appearances of the “benandante,” roughly the “well-farers,” a group of men and women in and near Friuli, Italy, who claimed that they engaged in nocturnal battles with witches to guard their crops. These took the form of astral projection and fighting with various vegetables (shades of the second Super Mario!). The Inquisition was looking for Lutherans to root out, or at least straightforward diabolic witches- they didn’t know what to make of the benandante.

Similar beliefs turn up in Germany and Switzerland, or similar-ish. That’s the rub- how many incidents do there need to be before you see a trend? And if you see this trend, to what do you attribute it? Ginzburg takes a small number of cases of similar (but far from identical) claims made by a few Italians and Germans as evidence for the continuation of a Central European pagan tradition. Certainly, this stuff does sound like fertility ritual. But there’s not a ton of evidence that it was organized practice handed down the generations, certainly not centuries. It seems a lot simpler to think that these were visions or self-made rituals. But the paganism thesis is certainly evocative, enough that it’s made its way into pop-cultural understandings of European paganism. And how many of Ginzburg’s critics can claim to have had that kind of influence? ****

Mary Kate says

My class tore this book to pieces but honestly, I kind of liked it. Do I feel that Ginzburg was a little bit willful with his evidence? Yes. In the words of Sherlock Holmes, he was twisting facts to suit theories instead of theories to suit facts. But do I think he is on to something? Also yes. This book is worth the read.

Michael says

Interesting survey of the evolution of a complex of myths in Italy. Ginzburg attempts to show how the Church and Inquisition morphed an ancient agricultural folk cult into the traditional witches sabbath. I found myself thinking of this as a meeting of two Heideggerian 'worlds' where the Inquisitors, baffled by the seemingly contradictory "good witches" they encountered, tried to shoehorn the benandanti into the Church's closest conceptual analog i.e. witches, the devil, and the sabbath. Of course, the benandanti are the ones in direct opposition to the witches!

Martasek says

Vážn? velmi ?tiv? napsáno, což se mi u tohoto druhu literatury moc ?asto nestává. Autor vychází z výslech? a udání v tehdejší dob? a snaží se nám vše jasn? vysv?tlit. I když se po n?jaké dob? ?lov?k m?že za?ít

ztrácet, protože se hodn? fakt? prolíná a míchá. Ale za p?e?tení rozhodn? stojí.

Michael says

Confirms that even for historians “bad” witches are more interesting than “good” witches.

"Anna la Rossa was trying, it would appear, to alleviate her own and her family's poverty by exploiting an extremely common but also insatiable desire, the longing to know something about the fate of a departed loved one (and linked with the hope of life beyond the tomb), mingled inextricably with the instinctive inability to think of a dead human being without restoring to it the life it no longer possessed. But this desire is tinged with remorse: remorse for not having lived up to what those beings had expected from us in life, here both alleviated and accentuated by the thought that there might be a way to do something for them, to directly better their otherworldly lot." -p. 34

"Even the excommunicated eat..." p. 37

"Where we might have expected to encounter the individual in his (presumed) non-historic immediacy, we find instead the force of the community's traditions, the hopes and needs tied to the life of society." p. 61

John David says

This book presents an extraordinarily complex set of historical data that even beginning to write about it seems like a daunting task. Making matters short and sweet for the sake of reviewing a book of such scholarship might not be advisable, but that’s what I’ll try to do here.

This book carefully combines an analysis of folklore, popular tradition, and culture. In the Friuli region of Italy, a group known as the “benandanti” (literally “well-farers” or “good walkers” but literally translated here as the “night battlers”) leave their villages on prescribed nights of the year to engage in fights with witches. These men and women who identify themselves as benandanti are born with the caul – that is, a piece of amniotic sac around their necks – and are thereby marked as benandanti from birth. According to them, the purpose of these nighttime adventures were to fight witches who were trying to infect and kill crops; they saw themselves as protectors of the crop. Therefore, they are usually identified as an “agrarian cult.” The origins of this cult are ambiguous, but seem to date back to older German divinity cults, and especially the auspices of the goddess Diana. No matter their origins, this is most important: the benandanti always imagined themselves as warriors for the Christian God, and completely Christian themselves.

The most fascinating part of the book, which by far takes up most of its content, is what happens when this cult meets the Catholic Church in the form of the Inquisition. Over a very long period of time, this interaction slowly turns a very Christian cult into a devilish coven of witches convening at a sabbat fighting against God, and therefore against the Church. Members were called before Church trials and demanded to explain their experiences. Some claimed that the night battles were oneiric visions, while others insinuated that they were quite “real.” Other irregularities were quickly latched onto by the Church, and it was soon turned into, at least in the eyes of the Church, nothing short of witchcraft.

Because Ginzburg spends most of his time showing this careful transformation, the numerous – perhaps a

few dozen – case studies presented are all carefully examined, sometimes dropped, picked up later in the text, and then re-examined; this can make the thread of the argument and its most prominent actors difficult to keep straight. Despite Ginzburg's tight, short presentation, parts of the book can seem repetitive. Of course, this aspect of the book is essential for scholars of the Italian folklore of the time, but it can be more than a little tedious for someone just interested in one of the more seminal texts in the development of what we now call "microhistory." While this might be difficult for someone with a less-than-scholarly interest in this material, it is nonetheless a careful and very important study that deserves the attention it has garnered.

Francesca says

Overall a highly compelling microhistory, particularly for those interested in that strange and wonderful region of Friuli, with Venetian inquisitorial practices, and with folk beliefs in early modern Europe.

Katie says

This book had a bit of an uphill battle against expectations: I've been hearing about it for years before I finally got around to reading it, and I already knew the rather amazing central focus. I also really liked The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-century Miller.

Night Battles is fascinating. Not so much on a page-to-page level: if anything, it can sometimes get bogged down in individual details there. But it's central conceit is really amazing: it's a study of a group of peasants in Fruili who called themselves *benandanti*, most easily translated as "do-gooders." These benandanti were "born with the caul" (when a piece of membrane covers the newborn's head), an event which destined them to a period of service as what essentially amounts to an anti-witch. Four times a year during the Ember Days the benandanti would arms themselves with sticks made of fennel and go out into the nearby fields. There, they would 'battle' with witches armed with sorghum sticks. The outcome of the battle would destine the region to a fertile harvest or a period of famine. It's a wild story, one that sounds like it's cribbed from a fantasy novel (but if you go read Guy Gavriel Kay's) Tigana, you'll find out it's the other way around). There are witches, werewolves, and fortune tellers all over these pages.

Ginzburg explores the potential origin of these ideas, but his real focus is in how they were perceived. Much like *The Cheese and the Worms*, this is a book about how popular religion intersects and interacts with its more highly-educated counterpart. The benandanti were originally met with confusion but at least tentative acceptance: the inquisitors honestly didn't really seem to know what to make of them, and if they seemed like solid Christians and were willing to name some witches, they were often let go. As time progressed, however, Ginzburg traces a subtle trend in inquisitorial questioning, suggesting that the Holy Office made increasing efforts to make these benandanti fit into the pattern that was then easily identifiable as witchcraft. They were repeatedly asked what role the devil had in their gatherings, whether they were supposed to abjure God, and whether infanticide played a role. By the end, the 'night battles' of the benandanti had been assimilated into the idea of the witches's sabbath.

It's an undeniably interesting book, as all of Ginzburg's seem to be. It's not always clear or accessible in its presentation, though - Ginzburg's style is to present a mass of case studies, and then comment on them when he feels like it. It's an interesting way to organize a book, but can be a little dizzying.