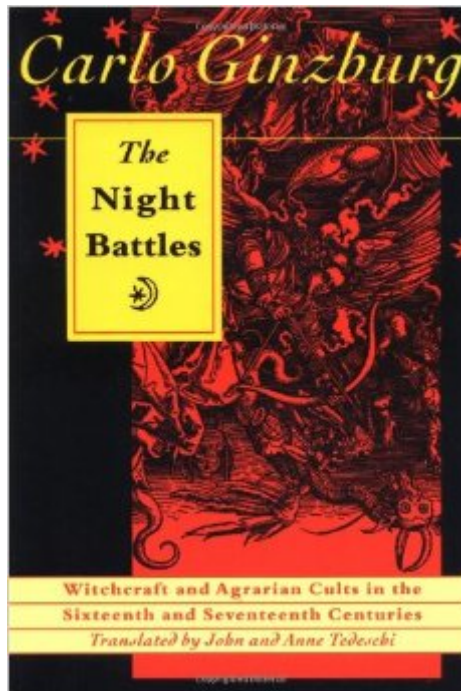


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The Night Battles: Witchcraft & Agrarian Cults In The Sixteenth & Seventeenth Centuries



Synopsis

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 witches' sabbat. The result of this cultural clash which lasted over a century, was the slow metamorphosis of the benandanti into their enemies – 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 peasants' 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. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

As anthropologists fanned around the world they brought back detailed accounts of shamanic practices of indigenous peoples from Africa, Asia, Siberia & Native America - but not from Europe. European shamanism (including druidism) is thought to have been largely stamped out due to the combined efforts of Enlightenment and the Holy Inquisition. The book opens up the question of the many similarities between Germanic, Latin, Slavic agricultural cults and their relationship to the Dionysian rituals as well as the issue of universality of core beliefs that underly indigenous practices

around the world. The book also pioneers a new understanding of Europeans and their history - one that focuses on the peasant and his relationship with the land (and the Church). The aristocratic elite that controlled the politics and religion of mediaeval Italian city states was just a tiny fraction of the population; Ginzburg therefore opens up a new (and should I say delicious) can of worms. This book represents a huge step forward in our understanding of European shamanism. Ginzburg burrows deep into the 16th century Inquisition archives from the Friuli region of Northern Italy (where Latin, Slavic and Germanic traditions come together). He returns with a fascinating discovery of an ancient fertility cult, whose participants (the *benandanti*) represented themselves as defenders of harvest and fertility of the fields. A *benandante* was someone who four times a year during the Ember days left the body and went "invisibly in spirit" to fight the witches and the devil - "we fight over all the fruits of the earth and for those things won by the *benandanti* that year there is abundance", said a peasant while questioned by the Inquisition.

Whether or not Carlo Ginzburg actually discovered evidence of shamanism in sixteenth-century Italy, in this or later books, is in part a matter of how one defines shamanism. What he undeniably found, in the seemingly unpromising records of the Inquisition, was evidence of beliefs so remote from those of official European culture as to be flatly unintelligible to the churchmen who first encountered them. Eventually, the Church courts managed to impose something resembling officially acceptable doctrines on the local population, but the process took generations, as Ginzburg is able to show from trial records. Briefly, Ginzburg found that, in the Friuli district, there was a widespread belief that certain men and women were marked at birth as defenders against witches and demons, these being regarded mainly as the enemies of the people, their livestock, and their crops. The chosen defenders, the "*Benandanti*," or "good walkers," ventured forth in their dreams to do battle with the forces of evil. Those born with the mark of the *Benandanti* regarded themselves as good Christians, the allies of the Church. To those outside the local culture, this position was clearly nonsense; unauthorized and unsanctified supernatural power could only be Satanic in origin, and those who claimed to exercise it were, at best, dangerously deluded. In the end, if the court records are to be trusted, they persuaded even the *Benandanti* themselves that this was the case. At least, the "absurd" and "outrageous" testimony of self-described *Benandanti* fades from the records, to be replaced with conventional witch-beliefs endorsed by the Holy Office.

In his book, *The Night Battles*, Carlo Ginzburg addresses the historical problem of why, during sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, did the Friulian fertility rituals of the *benandanti*, or

"good-walkers", gradually assimilate into witchcraft. The benandanti, marked at birth by the sign of the caul, served Christ and their community by leaving their bodies at night to fight evil witches that had attempted to destroy or steal their harvest. Because of the ignorance of the Friuli language and benandanti rituals, the Church conducted incessant inquisitions and trials against the self-proclaimed benandanti, which in effect, pushed the benandanti toward witchcraft and participation in the sabbat. In support of this argument, Ginzburg employs inquisitorial records that reveal an unmistakable gap between the beliefs and mentalities of the benandanti with those of the inquisitors. Brian P. Levak's review, published in the Journal of Interdisciplinary History, notes the significance of Ginzburg's exploration of the mentalities and culture of the Friuli. Levak writes, "The Night Battles is a milestone in the history of popular culture, for it was one of the first studies to use judicial records to gain direct access to popular beliefs." In addition, by skillfully using his primary source material, Ginzburg is able to discern between the "genuinely expressed popular ideas and those that reflect the more learned notions of [the] interrogators, especially when the accused was faced with either the threat or the reality of torture." To Ginzburg's credit, he allows the strength of the inquisitorial records to stand alone in support of his thesis and in exposing the popular culture of the Friuli.

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