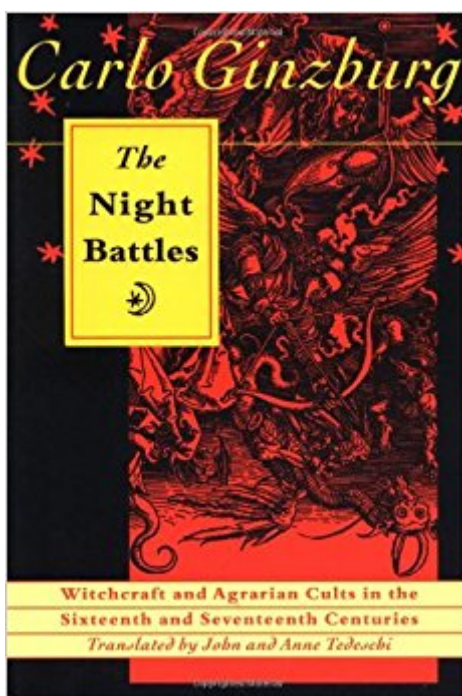


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# The Night Battles: Witchcraft & Agrarian Cults In The Sixteenth & Seventeenth Centuries



## 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

A tour-de-force of reconstruction, building out of scattered and fragmentary sources a whole world for the reader to inhabit. (Anthony Pagden London Review of Books) A work of genuine intellectual distinction. It is an unusually original contribution to the study of witchcraft in early modern Europe, but its importance is far from being exhausted by that description. (Peter Burke New York Review of Books)

Carlo Ginzburg's *The Night Battles* is a remarkable tale of witchcraft, folk culture, and persuasion in early modern Europe. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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.

I had to read this book for my Italian Renaissance class in University. It was AMAZING. Do you hear me ladies and gents? VERY good. I loved this book. It is translated and written quite well and can be understood easily, despite the constant re-telling of the same content. It can be verbose in this aspect. Many things are mentioned several times over, but that is one way the author re-enforces his point so that the reader will remember what is happening from page to page (I have a horrid recall memory so it was a plus for me, even though it did tend to get annoying). In fact, I wrote several pages of notes while reading this because I wanted to remember every bit of it for future reference. If you enjoy learning anything about the Witch Craze of the 16th century then you would love this book. The "Benandante" (what these people referred to themselves as) were part of (as the title says) an "Agrarian cult". These "cults" consisted of farmers and everyday citizens that were chosen to protect their land and crops from evil-doers by fighting them with various stalks. Usually Fennel for the Benandante and sorghum for the witches, (please excuse my vague language, it has been several months since I read through this). They would not do this physically however, they would leave their bodies while asleep which would render them into a cataleptic state. Instead, they would fight in their spiritual form. If the body was moved or messed with while in this form, the spirit could not return the body and would die. Also in this book, are the real accounts of these people via Inquisition paperwork. You can read what these people actually said, which to me? Gives this a much more personal and real feel to the book. I cannot write a comprehensive review because of my rusty memory on the subject. Suffice it to say though, it is worth being read. It has great references, evidence, and a really cool premise. I would definitely recommend this book :)

Had to read this for a medieval history class, and I was pretty impressed. Drawing on memory from when I read this, it deals with the Inquisition finding a strange part of Italy where men claim to go out and fight evil with fennel stalks in dream visions, women claim to have danced with and kissed the devil, etc. It sounds like a David Lynch movie, and perhaps should be one someday, but its all found in this book. Ginzburg handles the topic well, writing about as academically as one can given the topic, and you can tell he has a boyish interest in these bizarre antics as much as the reader hopefully does.

For information on the benandanti, this book is the best place to look. The benandanti have interested me over the years and getting down to reading this book was a nice treat. The book provides what historical documents say on the benandanti and helps give a framework for the progression of time and what all was going on. This book is an interesting look into what there is known on the benandanti as well as try to over explanations and ideas onto why they believed what they did, how they were reacted to during the witchhunts, and what might have been doing on,

Loved this piece! It is a wonderful look into the rabid mob mentality of the Inquisition. The translation is incredibly well thought out.

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