

Sources of the Sabbath: the Micro-histories of Carlo Ginzburg

Within the current of human lives and ideas flowing through his broad view of culture, Carlo Ginzburg perceives here, the shadow of an archetype, and there, a documented moment. In this paper I will use the term micro-history to refer to Carlo Ginzburg's intense focus on an individual life or idea. Obtaining an image, Ginzburg creates a cultural milieu of language, myth, and ritual. Ginzburg composes his story, what he calls his documentary series, from a challenging collection of micro-historical shards brought together by his sweeping erudition but also remarkably often by serendipitous research if not chance. In his documentary series "we detect a field of forces, of varying intensity, now converging, now conflicting."¹ By their counter-entropic re-assembly, do these shards resemble the amphora of historical time and place they are taken to represent, and what do they tell us of the acts that shattered and scattered them?

All history is constructed from micro-historical elements. There is a witness and an event, or a scribe and a record, or a word and a myth. The assembly of these elements entails a fundamental uncertainty of sequence and meaning, synchrony and morphology. When he describes how knowledge came to Menocchio, Ginzburg unveils his model of micro-historical method, "a mass of composite elements, ancient and not so ancient, came together in a new construction."²

The risk of micro-history is that the practitioner picks and chooses the elements of his narrative from "[f]ragmentary testimonies, separated in time and space, which ...

¹ *Ecstasies*, pp. 50.

² *Cheese and Worms*, pp. 61.

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demonstrate the depth of the cultural stratum that we have sought to uncover.”³ Pointing to the cheese and worms cosmogonic analogy drawn by Menocchio, Ginzburg observes that the miller “unknowingly echoed ancient and distant myths” and calls it “an astonishing coincidence...unless one is willing to go along with quite unacceptable theories, such as the collective unconscious, or simplistic ones, such as chance.”

Ginzburg clearly believes that the analogy “constitute[d] one of the proofs, even though fragmentary and partly obliterated, of the existence of a millenarian cosmological tradition that, beyond the differences of languages, combined myth with science.”

Because to implicate the collective unconscious is unacceptable, Ginzburg proposes a more probable explanation, “oral transmission from generation to generation.” This is a major feature of the hypothesis Ginzburg also offers for the witches’ Sabbath, “the diffusion...of a cult with shamanistic undercurrents.”⁴ Ginzburg promises to mitigate the risk that “all descriptions are culturally conditioned.” He believes his method is implicitly objective: “the objectivity of the reconstruction is guaranteed by the intersection, not always convergent, of different testimonies.”⁵ The intersection is at some point of depth of focus, where Ginzburg chooses to adjust the focal plane of his lens. Ginzburg intends “to construct a morphologically compact documentary series.” He does not insist on the chronologically consistent sequence of conventional history in order to begin. “The disjunction of morphology and history [has] the purely heuristic purpose of outlining ... the contours of an elusive subject.”⁶ His subject is an object—if there is history outside the mind of the historian—not to be found at one place and time. What does history mean

³ *Ecstasies*, pp. 173.

⁴ *Cheese and Worms*, pp. 58.

⁵ *Ecstasies*, pp. 208.

⁶ *Ecstasies*, pp. 194.

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to Ginzburg? There is no objective history. There is not even an objective event. There is only interpretation. “To reject this option would be to preclude any possibility of ordering non-synchronous documents in homogenous series—and thus all possibility of interpreting the past.”⁷ There is nothing more elusive than a convincing explanation of the witches’ Sabbath. Does Ginzburg’s process of construction of a documentary series *change history*? I conjecture that another method, or even another equally erudite mind using the same method, could construct a different documentary series. Human history is like prismatic paint, its color changing with the angle of incident light.

Beyond the general practice of witchcraft, to which was attributed such diverse phenomena as poor crop yields, eccentric women and unpleasant old ladies, and unfortunate outcomes of childbirth, the witches’ Sabbath was a more or less specific occasion identified with a complex set of ritual behaviors characterized by night gatherings, ecstatic dancing and orgiastic sex, invocation and visitation of spirits living and dead, and the consumption of bizarre concoctions that included, in the most extreme descriptions, the flesh and blood of children. Ginzburg’s historiography places three distinct sources of the witches’ Sabbath, with considerable interplay between them. First, his examination of what inquisitorial testimony remains shows stock answers to standard questions, strongly suggesting a psycho-social stereotype formulated by the power elite and impressed on the testimony of the persecuted. Second, the recurring theme discussed above in the works of Ginzburg, and a powerful tool of his analyses, much of what goes on in the witches’ Sabbath seems founded in pre-Christian belief systems and enduring oral traditions; thus cultural diffusion fostered a European form of Eurasian shamanism. Third, that the witches’ Sabbath manifested a folkloric archetype drawn from the

⁷ *Ecstasies*, pp. 184.

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collective unconscious—that Ginzburg might redefine as the collective human trans-cultural or linguistic experience. Underlying and joining the second and third sources is the possibility of pharmacologically induced ecstasy and/or frenzy by either *claviceps purpurea*, St. Anthony’s Fire, a parasitic fungus known as rye ergot, or *amanita muscaria*, Fly Agric, a hallucinogenic mushroom of worldwide natural distribution.⁸

From these sources Ginzburg composes his narrative series of the witches’ Sabbath. His primary thesis is derived from the second source, the process of cultural diffusion, to “reconstruct the folkloric roots of the witches’ Sabbath ... from the evidence on the ecstatic cult of the nocturnal goddess.” In so doing he has “arrived at a hypothesis of a Eurasian continuum” that establishes “the presence of shamanistic beliefs in the European milieu.”⁹ Ginzburg’s destination is the global trans-cultural Orphean myth of the descent into Hades. “All the routes we have negotiated to clarify the folkloric dimension of the Sabbath converge on one point: the journey into the realm of the dead.”¹⁰

I will make some critical remarks on Ginzburg’s narrative series for the witches’ Sabbath, and finally consider his effort to convince us that his method yields a result that can be called history. Sometimes Ginzburg seems to confuse even himself.

But the doubts, attempts at a rational explanation, or references to remote traditions evidently point to an inability to decipher a mythical and ritual content which...seemed incomprehensible.¹¹

Ginzburg draws frequently on the work of Mircea Eliade, but Eliade scarcely considers European shamanism.¹² Ginzburg is overly modest if he does not credit himself for much

⁸ *Ecstasies*, pp. 303-307.

⁹ *Ecstasies*, pp. 210-213.

¹⁰ *Ecstasies*, pp. 242.

¹¹ *Ecstasies*, pp. 233.

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of the development of the concept. Because Ginzburg raises the issue of non-synchronous morphology, I will briefly observe two contrasts of the Salem witch trials in Colonial America with the European witch hunt of 1550-1650. First, there is very little suggestion of shamanistic ritual in the Salem record, which is substantial.¹³ Also, there is a complete lack of evidence of any pharmacological source in the Colonial American witch hunt, but *amanita muscaria* was known to pre-Colombian Ojibway on Lake Superior.¹⁴ Ginzburg does not draw excessive attention to the potential synergy of the diffusion and pharmacological hypotheses, yet it is there when he asserts that the “documentation we have accumulated proves beyond all reasonable doubt the existence of an underlying Eurasian mythological unity.”¹⁵ If this unity is real, the connection is compelling. I will note two points of nexus. The first point of nexus is that the witches’ Sabbath contains a panoply of themes drawn from the female dominated cult of Diana-Artemis-Herodias-Oriente-Hecate.¹⁶ St. Anthony’s Fire, *claviceps purpurea*, ergot-parasitized rye, was “widely employed by midwives” to relieve pain in pregnancy.¹⁷ The second point of nexus is the highly possible linguistic connection between “Aryan populations originating in northern Eurasia” who settled north of the Indus River in the second millennium BC and Indo-Iranian populations.¹⁸ First reported in 1730, primitive Siberian shamans used *amanita muscaria*, boiling the mushroom to drink the tea and often sharing their own toxic urine. There was a Vedic connection. “Soma, the god-narcotic of ancient India, attained an exalted place in magico-religious ceremonies of the

¹² *Shamanism*, pp. 375-393.

¹³ See, for example, *Salem-Village Witchcraft*.

¹⁴ *Plants of the Gods*, pp. 85.

¹⁵ *Ecstasies*, pp. 267.

¹⁶ *Ecstasies*, pp. 130-140.

¹⁷ *Plants of the Gods*, pp. 104.

¹⁸ *Ecstasies*, pp. 305.

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Aryans, who 3500 years ago, swept down from the north into the Indus Valley, bringing with them the cult of Soma.”¹⁹ The metaphor of rain was used to describe the drinking of urine in the Soma ritual. This practice connects the Siberian shaman to the *Rig-Veda*.

Setting aside his reservations quoted above about the validity of the concept, Ginzburg resorts to the third source, the notion of an archetype rising out of the collective unconscious, to provide a rather persuasive proof by induction for his method of narrative series to give an account of the witches’ Sabbath. The operational cultural mechanism of the archetype is a linguistic network of core symbols. Time extends this network of myth and ritual to form a loose trans-cultural linkage of its elements: oral tradition. Ginzburg endeavors to present a plausibility argument for his witches’ Sabbath narrative series—not without micro-historical risks of its own—when he produces a parallel narrative series for the symbol of lameness. The archetype suggested by the vast folkloric tradition from Oedipus to Cinderella (including even the Chinese female foot-binding custom) demonstrates “the trans-cultural importance of mythical and ritualistic lameness.”²⁰ Ginzburg’s suggestion of a linguistic linkage of the Finno-Ugric word for *amanita muscaria*, (*poh*), and the Sanskrit (Indo-European) word for lameness (*pangu*), is a very considerable leap. However, taken as a whole, Ginzburg’s discussion of the myth and ritual surrounding lameness is a useful further exposition of his historiographical method and an enlightening elaboration pushing the possibility that his method is valid.

Do I believe him?

¹⁹ *Plants of the Gods*, pp. 82-83.

²⁰ *Ecstasies*, pp. 226-232.

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Probably, but his method begs for a more scientific foundation. He seeks to trace “not one narrative among many, but the matrix of all possible narratives.”²¹ Ginzburg’s network of cultural hooks and linguistic eyes suggests itself to recent inter-disciplinary work on complexity and the theory of networks, applied to history considered as an open system.

Ginzburg concludes his book on the witches’ Sabbath with a lament. “We know and always will know too little about human history.”²² That little is of immeasurable value to his method.

We can know much about the world network of human lives and ideas.

Pete Ahrens
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²¹ *Ecstasies*, pp. 307.

²² *Ecstasies*, pp. 267.

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