The Fertility of Lake Cerknica

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In his book, *Ecstasies* Carlo Ginzburg writes of 'fragmentary testimonies, separated in time and space, which once again demonstrate the depth of the cultural stratum that we have sought to uncover'.[2] He is referring to strands of fertility belief, such as those associated with the amniotic sac or caul and the nocturnal battles with evil forces to decide the future year's crop, that existed across Europe in the pre-modern period. Apparently similar beliefs link geographically diverse groups such as the *benandanti* of Friuli, south Slav *krstniki* and Livonian werewolves.

The aim of this article is to discuss ideas about a landscape phenomenon, Lake Cerknica in Slovenia, in the light of Ginzburg's conjectures about an undercurrent of fertility beliefs in early modern popular culture. It will also provide further 'fragmentary testimonies' that might establish tangible links between various strands of popular culture within east-central Europe.

Lake Cerknica is situated in the limestone Karst approximately half way between the cities of Trieste and Ljubljana. Known in Slovene as *Cerkniško jezero*, it is a periodic lake and fills at those times of year when a rise in the water table causes both groundwater and water in underground streams to well up through the limestone lake floor and surface streams to fill the basin from below. Subsequent reductions in precipitation and groundwater flow cause the water to drain from the lake through holes. At different times of year, depending on the pattern of weather in the region, the basin may be almost entirely dry, wholly water filled, or in some intermediate state. In early summer, the lake usually comprises a small area of still, open water surrounded by reed-beds. In August, the land uncovered by water is mown; this sour grass (*kisla trava*) is used for cattle bedding and fodder. By autumn, when rainwater flows in from the mountain streams and rivers, it is the south-west of the Cerknica valley that floods most heavily. The north-eastern parts of the valley (*polje*), which have not flooded in historical times, provide extremely fertile land.[3] This contrast with the surrounding limestone Karst is of particular relevance when trying to construct a cultural map of the area.

On maps from the early modern period, the lake was illustrated as being a far larger and more extravagant feature than is actually the case. Wolfgangus Lazius's map of 1573 shows

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[2] Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstacies: Deciphering the Witches Sabbath* (1990), 173.

[3] Irene Portis Winner, *Žerovnica: A Slovenian Village* (Providence, 1971), 19–20.

Figure 1. Wolfgangus Lazius, '*Goritiae, Karstii, Chaczeolae, Carniolae, Histrae et Windorum Marchiae descrip*' (Theatrum Ortis Terrarum, 1573), reproduced by kind permission of the Slovenian National Library (NUK), Ljubljana, Slovenia

an extremely overscale 'Cyrckniczersee' (see Figure 1)[4] and Jan Jansson's seventeenth-century map of the area shows a 'Czirnicser See' as large as the whole Venetian lagoon (accurately pictured, it should be a tiny fraction of the size).[5] The lake was still depicted in

[4] Wolfgangus Lazius, *Goritiae, Karstii, Chaczeolae, Carniolae, Histriae et Windorum Marchiae descrip*. (Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, 1573).

[5] Johannes Janssonius, 'Karstia, Carniola, et Windorum Marchia cum Confinus' in *Nouvel Atlas*, vol. 1, part II (Amsterdam, 1642).

cartographical illustrations as being far larger than befitted its real dimensions. This natural phenomenon seems to dominate the page and to be the most important feature on maps of Carniola. On Pieter Schenck's 1715 map of western Europe, Lake Cerknica was drawn vastly out of proportion, whereas the nearby and far larger lakes of Ossiach and Woerth in Carinthia are not even represented.[6]

Lake Cerknica enjoyed the status of a scientific 'phenomenon' in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Much of the initial scientific interest in Lake Cerknica was in creating an accurate model for the hydrology of the lake. At a meeting of the Royal Society of London in 1688 it is reported that

> Halley showed an experiment whereby the evacuation of the lake of Zirknitts and its sudden filling again were exemplified. He took two basins and placed one higher than the other and ordered them so that this water ran out of the upper, when it was full much faster than when it was in parts empty.[7]

Edmond Halley's contemporaries were not only interested in the lake's fluvial regime, but in the fertile nature of the Cerknica valley provided by this unusual ecosystem. In 1669, the traveller Edward Brown(e) 'had a desire to take a view of the Zirchnitzer Sea or lake of Zirchnitz, so much spoken of and written on by so few'.[8] He reported in *Philosophical Transactions* that the ecology of the Cerknica valley was so varied that it offered the inhabitants an opportunity to keep themselves occupied and be fed all year round. The ground that was seasonally submerged by the lake was used for crops at drier times, and it could also then provide fish and game.[9]

The Cerknica valley itself is relatively self-contained and has not been en route to any main towns, either in the early modern period or now.[10] No traveller needs to include it in an itinerary other than for the special purpose of seeing the periodic lake. The Hanoverian traveller and Royal Society member, Johann Georg Keysler, remarked in 1730 that at Planina 'those travellers who are curious, take a horse in order to go to Cirknitz'.[11]

The following passage is the description of Lake Cerknica and the Karst region of Carniola that Baron Valvasor, a Carniolan nobleman, sent to the Royal Society in 1685:

> All the authorities who have written about this lake have moreover stated that it is a great natural wonder that it is possible in one year in one area to fish hunt and reap. But this is the very least that can be stated, because this lake has many other phenomena and wonders. It has, namely, many caverns or holes. From some of these fish appear, from others crabs, from others still leeches and from others noises. And

[6] Pieter Schenck, 'Atlas Minor' (Amsterdam, 1715), reproduced in Phillip Allen, *The Atlas of Atlases* (1992), 90–1.

[7] Royal Society Journal Book, vol. 7, 70–3, in Branko Reisp, *Korespondenca Janeza Vajkarda Valvasorja z Royal Society* (Ljubljana, 1987).

[8] Edward Brown, 'An Account from . . . Dr Brown Concerning an Un-common Lake, called the Zirchnitzer-See, in Carniola', *Philosophical Transactions*, part 4, no. 54 (13 December 1669), 1083.

[9] *ibid.*, 1083–5.

[10] Jože Šorn, 'Zanimivosti z naših cest v 18. stoletju', *Kronika*, XXVII, 3 (1979), 157–67. The reproduction of Elsner's map from 1763 shows a road network that almost entirely bypasses the Cerknica valley. Travellers who made their way there had to travel on minor roads for part of the way.

[11] Johann Georg Keysler, *Neueste Reisen durch Deutschland* (Hannover, 1740–1), LXXVIII Brief, 846.

> whenever it thunders in the sky, at that time in certain caverns water is ejected with an incredibly great velocity with unknown force (*tunc ex certis antris cum tali impetu exit aqua incredibilis magni impetus*). There are other holes, in which doves remain for the entire winter, there is yet another hole from which mist and clouds come from as well as large thunder bolts and thunder. It is possible to travel through some mountains by boat: I myself have steered a boat alone through a mountain. In Carniola we also have wonderful caves and caverns, in which I have found lakes and many marvels. We also have a tree which on specific nights becomes verdant. I have spent a solitary night beneath it. We have a certain animal marked by the Devil and led into the pastures by him (or so the common people say, which is the honest truth). This animal's pelt is sold in many provinces and lands. There are, needless to say, many other wonders in my home land which until now have not been investigated, due to the lack of a person curious enough to undertake this task in my country.[12]

Other writers continued to represent the idea of an area of great natural abundance and fertility. Keysler found that it was a local saying 'that a person may sow and reap, hunt and fish in the space of one year'.[13] Royal Society member Jeremiah Milles also recorded the valley's year-round abundance in his diary in 1737:

> throughout the whole year this lake affords a great plenty of provision to the inhabitants round about, and what is very justly affirmed of it as a great wonder is: that within the space of a few days one may fish, shoot and hunt in it and one may see water, fish, fowl, corn, grass, cattle and all sorts of game and fowl.[14]

The fertility of an area as an idea occupies a completely different intellectual status in a pre-modern cultural milieu such as seventeenth-century Carniola than it might do in a twentieth-century one. The attraction of travellers to the Cerknica valley, with its varied ecosystem of deciduous and evergreen trees, plentiful game, varied crops and freshwater fish, was not accidental but reflects the preoccupations of what Fernand Braudel called the biological *ancien régime*.[15] In a historical period when the majority of people were involved in agricultural production, fertility is surely one of the most interesting features a landscape can possess. Seventeenth- or eighteenth-century mapmakers, such as Pieter Schenck,[16] who drew Lake Cerknica out of proportion to its actual dimensions and omitted Lake Bled which is nowadays the most popular tourist attraction in Slovenia, were reflecting those very cultural preoccupations.

Perhaps the most grandiose presentation of the data of an unusual and fertile area around Lake Cerknica can be found in Franz Anton von Steinberg's monograph of 1758, *Gruendliche Nachricht*, which was heavily influenced in style by the French *Encyclopédie*. The frontispiece to his study shows Lake Cerknica surrounded by classical deities. Diana and Ceres stand in the 'magnificence of the fields' (*Felder-Pracht*) and Pan admires the 'beautiful wood' of the forest:

[12] Letter to Thomas Gale, 5 March 1686, in Reisp, *op. cit.*, 25.

[13] Keysler, *op. cit.*, 848.

[14] Jeremiah Milles, Letters to the Bishop of Waterford, British Library Manuscripts, Add. Mss 15,774 (letter dated 15 July 1737).

[15] Fernand Braudel, *The Structure of Everyday Life* (1981), 90.

[16] Schenck, *Atlas Minor* in Allen, *op. cit.*, 90–1.

> This picture is intended to show how God's omnipotence allows a wonder of nature to be seen and not concealed. It is here that a person can manifestly know the rich generosity of heaven. We can immerse ourselves in air, water, earth and fire. All the elements can be assembled in one place. At this wonderous lake one may clearly see that.
>
> The circle of Gods squabbled over the land of Carniola's glory and honour. Neptune alone gained welfare from that. But the picture shows this lake to have Diana's gifts in abundance. Pan is extolled through beautiful wood and so too is Ceres in the green magnificence of the fields.[17]

In his essay 'Clues: roots of an evidential paradigm', Carlo Ginzburg has characterized the writings of the Enlightenment, and in particular the *Encyclopédie*, as a 'cultural assault' that involved the codification and appropriation of older forms of knowledge from the lower social orders.[18] The process of acculturation that took place between approximately 1650 and 1800 can be placed within a general western European impulse to know and record the world at that time: the scientists of the Royal Society certainly belonged in some respects to this intellectual trend. The empirical data concerning the fertility of the Cerknica valley in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was drawn largely from a knowledge that already existed among the local inhabitants. The Slovene historian Janez Šumrada has written that 'the significant part of (Edward) Brown's method was oral questioning'[19] and he himself stated that he was 'informed' by two local men, Andreas Wifer and his brother Johannes.[20] Baron Valvasor named his local source as the elderly peasant Jerne Roschenta.[21] These writers 'codified' older knowledge previously preserved in oral culture, writing in English, German or Latin rather than the Slovene of Karst peasants, but in doing so they reduced many of the intricacies of local knowledge and acculturized the significance of Lake Cerknica as a symbol of fertility.

Peter Burke has remarked that '"fertility" is a remarkably useful concept for linking disparate elements'.[22] In this case he was referring to Carnival, but the statement could apply just as well to other aspects of early modern popular culture. Popular beliefs about fertility in east-central Europe have been the focus of scholarly attention for some time. Perhaps the most well-known and detailed study on this subject is *I Benandanti* by Carlo Ginzburg.[23] The research for the book was done in the archives of the archbishopric of Udine, which contain transcripts and other records of numerous trials for heresy from the early modern period. The sign of one's 'calling' to the sect was to have been born with a complete amniotic sac. These 'good walkers' or *benandanti* were self-appointed good

[17] Franz Anton von Steinberg, *Gruendliche Nachricht von dem in dem Inner-Krain gelegenen Czirknitzer-See* (Laybach, 1758), Preface.

[18] Carlo Ginzburg, 'Clues: roots of an evidential paradigm' in his *Myths, Emblems, Clues* (1990), 115.

[19] Janez Šumrada, 'Valvasorjev Angleški Sodobnik Edward Browne v Slovenskih Deželah leta 1669' in A. Vovko (ed.), *Valvasorjev Zbornik* (Ljubljana, 1990), 57.

[20] Brown, *op. cit.*, 1085.

[21] J. W. von Valvasor, *Die Ehre dess Herzogthums Crain* (Nuernberg/Laybach, 1689), vol. 1, Buch IV, 647.

[22] Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot, 1978), 191.

[23] Carlo Ginzburg, *I Benandanti* (Turin, 1966), published in English as *The Night Battles* (1983).

spirits, who would fight on the Quartember days for the future of the crops with stalks of fennel against witches who were armed with sorghum. (The Quartember days were the three days of fasting prior to Lent, Pentecost, the third week in September, and the third week of Advent.) Ginzburg cautiously concluded, in partial agreement with the older work of Margaret Murray, that the group represented remnants of a pre-Christian fertility cult, which was pan-European in its origins.[24] These arguments have been refined and extended in Ginzburg's more recent study, *Ecstacies: Deciphering the Witches Sabbath*.[25]

Other scholars have undertaken research along similar lines. Luisa Accati has also written about the area around Udine in the seventeenth century. Unlike the predominantly male *benandanti*, the 'good witches' she identified were women who rid the fields of vermin by their spells.[26] Gabor Klaniczay has linked the south Slav and Friulian fertility beliefs with currents in Hungarian popular culture.[27]

The Croatian folklorist, Maja Bošković-Stulli, identified a 'geographical complex' where similar fertility cults existed: Slovenia, the Croatian littoral, Istria and the islands in the Gulf of Quarnero. Because the area was linguistically and historically diverse, she felt that these beliefs must go back to the early Slavic settlements.[28] *Krstniki* or *Krsniki* (i.e. those initiates who were directly involved in ritualistic practices involving fertility) existed across this complex or area. The name may be linked to St John the Baptist (*Janez Krstnik*) or alternatively to the word *kres*, which is a type of bonfire lit on St John's Eve (*kresna noč*, 23 June). The midsummer bonfire, known variously as a *kres*, *kris* or *krijes*, was lit throughout Slovenia and Croatia.[29]

The lighting of ceremonial bonfires on St John's Eve was a common event all over Europe before the twentieth century. Robert Darnton tells us that during the summer solstice in eighteenth-century France 'crowds made bonfires, jumped over them, danced around them, and threw into them objects with magical powers, hoping to avoid disaster and to obtain good fortune during the rest of the year'.[30] In Macedonia, bonfires were lit on this night, which boys jumped through in order to exterminate fleas.[31] In addition to the bonfires, there were also water rituals or hydromancy,[32] including river bathing and dipping branches or ringing a pitcher of well water with St John's flower.[33] Peter Burke has argued that 'Fire and water are common symbols of purification, so it is plausible to argue that the meaning of the festival (of St John) was renewal.'[34] For James Frazer these midsummer rituals were linked to more ancient ones, such as the Feast of Adonis which aimed to encourage the growth of vegetation.[35]

[24] Margaret A. Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (Oxford, 1962).

[25] Ginzburg, *Ecstacies*, *op. cit.*, 160.

[26] Luisa Accati, 'The larceny of desire: the Madonna in seventeenth-century Europe' in Jim Obelkevich, Lyndal Roper and Raphael Samuel (eds), *Disciplines of Faith: Studies in Religion, Politics and Patriarchy* (1987), 78.

[27] Gabor Klaniczay, 'Shamanistic elements in central European witchcraft' in his *The Uses of Supernatural Power* (Oxford, 1990), 129–50.

[28] Maja Bošković-Stulli, 'Kresnik-Krsnik, ein Wesen aus der kroatischen und slovenischen Volksueberlieferung', *Fabula*, III (1959–60), 293.

[29] Branimir Bratanić, 'Ethnological cartography and atlases' in J. Cuisenier (ed.), *Europe as a Cultural Area* (The Hague, 1979), 110.

[30] Robert Darnton, 'The great cat massacre', *History Today* (August 1984), 11.

[31] G. F. Abbott, *Macedonian Folklore* (Chicago, 1969), 57.

[32] Burke, *op. cit.*, 181.

[33] Abbott, *op. cit.*, 50–8.

[34] Burke, *op. cit.*, 181.

[35] J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1911–15), vol. II, 115.

The Feast of St John is a recurrent theme in the thread of fertility beliefs, which are recorded across Europe up to the twentieth century. In parts of central Europe on St John's Eve, *Johanniskraut* was placed around special coals (*Beifusstaude Kohlen*) which were said to afford protection against epilepsy and fevers. A dance was then performed to ward away witches, evil spirits and illnesses.[36] In 1838, the Polish ethnologist Emil Korytko recorded that on St John's Eve (*kresni večer*), peasants in Carniola gathered with flaming torches in fields and on hills to observe rites and ceremonies.[37] Friedrich Krauss identified witch cults which existed in the Karst in the nineteenth century, which were linked to the caves at Postojna. He described how on 'Johannisnacht' the witches and the 'Kerstniki' fought battles. In order to deprive the witches of arms, staves and other blunt instruments were buried.[38] The *benandante* Menichino from Latisano mentioned the feast of St John as a night for battling over the future of the crops.[39]

Baron Valvasor stated that the evacuation of Lake Cerknica usually took place around the time of the feast of St John the Baptist (*circa festum sancti Ioannis Baptistae*), although it could take place later in the year, only to return in October or November.[40] He also indicated that Lake Cerknica was a significant place for witchcraft and his illustration of Slivnica mountain beside Cerknica indicates that it was a place where witches met (see Figure 2), making the particular point that it was the area around Cerknica where witches were most heavily persecuted.[41] According to the historian August Dimitz, 'belief in the Devil manifested itself in witches. They were to be found most particularly in the area around Lake Cerknica, that is beside the towns of Cerknica, Lož, Planina and about the mountain of Snežnik.'[42] It is also from Valvasor we learn that many people in the Pivka valley, approximately ten miles from Lake Cerknica, witnessed battles between the 'Sentjansaveze' and the 'Vedaveze', who were witches that drank the blood of children. Normally the fights took place on Christmas Eve, but the name of the good fighters links again to St John and suggests that there is a confusion or concatenation of beliefs about witchcraft and beliefs connected with fertility.[43]

Jacob Kelemina, writing in the 1930s, mentioned that 'Slovenes living near Gorica have a belief that on the evening before St John's Eve that witches fight with krstniki'.[44] He also stated that 'every area of land had its own krstnik' and that the marking on fruit was believed to be the battle scars from the ritual fights to decide upon the future of the crops.[45]

[36] Edmund Schneeweis, *Feste und Volksbraeuche der Sorben* (Berlin, 1959), 144.

[37] Emil Korytko, quoted in Vilko Novak, *Raziskovalci Slovenskega Življenja* (Ljubljana, 1986), 148.

[38] Friedrich S. Krauss, *Volksglaube und religioeser Brauch der Suedslaven* (Leipzig, 1890), 116, 128.

[39] Ginzburg, *Night Battles*, *op. cit.*, 75.

[40] Letter to Thomas Gale, 17 November 1687, in Reisp, *op. cit.*, 56.

[41] Valvasor, *op. cit.*, vol. I, Buch IV, 633.

[42] August Dimitz, *Geschichte Krains von der aeltesten Zeit bis auf das Jahr 1813* (Laibach, 1875), 145.

[43] Valvasor, *op. cit.*, vol. III, Buch XI, 456. This concatenation can be seen in part from a witchcraft trial in Croatia in 1697 when a middle-aged woman, Nežka Jeršetka, was accused of preparing hail from 'quartember ashes, sand and dew' (in Dimitz, *op. cit.*, 145).

[44] Jacob Kelemina, *Bajke in pripovedke slovenskega ljudstva* (Celje, 1930), 40.

[45] *ibid.*, 39. Similar battles between the 'Krsnjak' and the 'Strigon' are recorded by Maja Bošković-Stulli in *Zakopano Zlato. Hrvatske usmene pripovijetke predaje i legende iz Istre* (Pula/Rijeka, 1986), 233–4.

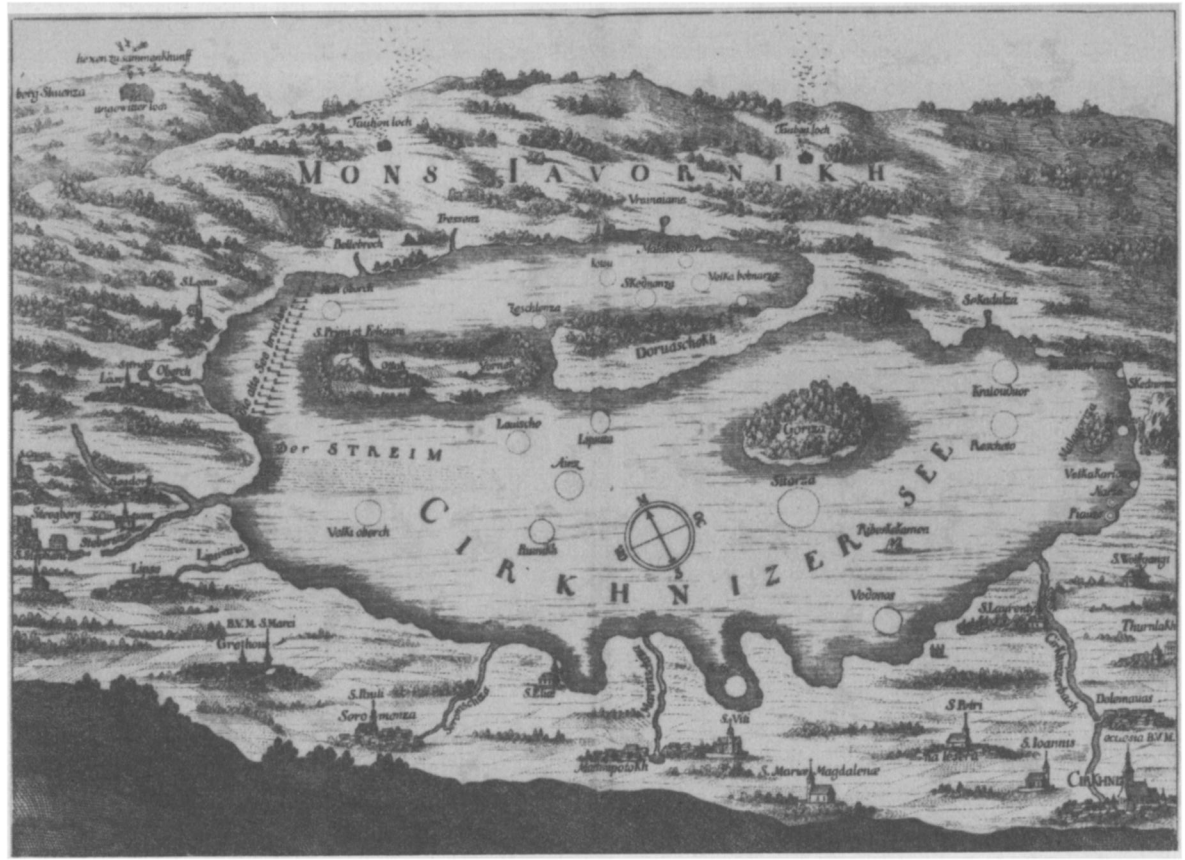

Figure 2. J. W. von Valvasor, '*Die Ehre dess Herzogthums Crain*' (Nuernberg/Laybach, 1689), vol. I, buch IV, 633, reproduced by kind permission of the British Library

Another Slovene ethnologist, Niko Kuret, also recorded beliefs that linked St John's Eve (*kres*) with fertility in the 1960s. According to one folk saying, 'Whenever there is frost and snow on the mountains on St John's Eve, it will be a good year for buckwheat.' Another saying conveys the idea of a battle between the elements to decide the future year's weather. In Solkan, near to Gorizia and the Italian border, they say that 'If the bora wind whistles on St John's Eve, the whole year will be dry, but if the southerly weather is victorious (*zmaguje*), then the *mornik* will have its say until Christmas Eve (i.e. the weather will be wet).'[46]

Many of these general fertility beliefs are echoed in the folklore of Bela Krajina in Slovenia, which was largely settled by Balkan Slavs who moved north to avoid Turkish colonization. In November the harvest is baptized (*vino se krsti*), and in the area around Metlika a special thread is strung from the vines in the shape of a cross between three in the morning and sunrise on Tomaževo (21 December) to protect the crop from damaging hail brought by the devil or from witches. But perhaps the closest parallel in Bela Krajina to events surrounding the *benandanti/krstniki* occurs on St John's Eve. Young girls called *kresnice* and one boy process through the village in white, blessing the crops with traditional formulae. Special herbs, such as ferns, are gathered on this evening, including *šentjanževa roza* (St John's flower), and are put under the eaves as protection against lightning.[47]

Robert J. W. Evans has linked the *benandanti/krstniki* to the sect of the *Springer* led by the Slovene female mystic Maruscha, from Gorizia, in the early seventeenth century.[48] Like the *benandanti* described by Ginzburg, she led her followers in an ecstatic state during the night. One contemporary described the gathering in a valley as being like writhing eels as Maruscha's followers danced and hopped as if possessed by the devil.[49]

The *benandanti*, like Maruscha and the *krstniki* identified by Kelemina and Krauss, are recognized as coming from the area around Gorizia on the border between Slovenia and Italy, and from the Karst area around Trieste. Carlo Ginzburg has always suggested that there was an important link between the peasant culture of the Friuli in north-east Italy and that of the south Slavs. In his book *Ecstacies*, he has mentioned the 'Slavic component in Friuli's ethnic background and character'.[50] The idea of a 'Slavic thread' within the fertility beliefs of eastern and central Europe is highly plausible and has also been put forward by Maja Bošković-Stulli and Gabor Klaniczay. Nevertheless, the composition of this 'thread' has not been fully explored and, as it stands, it is a rather intangible notion. Can it be automatically assumed that the *benandanti* of Friuli and the *krstniki* of Slovenia were *separate*, or did the individuals involved in these rituals belong to some sort of

[46] Niko Kuret, *Prazničnо Leto Slovencev*, part 2 (Celje, 1967), 142–3.

[47] Joseph L. Conrad, 'Rituals and customs along the Kolpa (Bela Krajina)', *Slovene Studies*, VII, 1–2 (1985), 23–33.

[48] Robert J. W. Evans, *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy 1550–1700* (1984), 407.

[49] Leopold Schuster, *Fuerstbischof Martin Brenner, ein Charakterbild aus der Steirischen Reformationsgeschichte* (Graz/Leipzig, 1898), 617.

[50] Ginzburg, *Ecstacies*, *op. cit.*, 160.

unfixed and liminal cultural category?[51] The manuscripts that Ginzburg has quoted from should lead us to ask whether *benandanti* were sometimes themselves 'Slovenes' (or equally whether *krstniki* were 'Friulians'). According to one trial transcript:

> These *benandanti*, witches and warlocks who number about three thousand come from Capo d'Istria, Muggia, Trieste and the territory about Monfalcone, and other places of the Carso (i.e. Karst).[52]

All the places mentioned – Koper (Capo d'Istria), Milje (Muggia), Trst (Trieste) and Tržič (Monfalcone) – were within Slovene autochthonous territory in the seventeenth century.[53] On another occasion, in 1622, a defendant clearly associated the 'Slavs' with the witches.[54]

Until fairly recently the linguistic border between Friulian and Slovene speakers has been geographical rather than political, the former generally occupying the flatter lands of the Adriatic flood plain and the latter the hilly areas of the Karst and the Julian Alps. The nationalist agenda of many studies of this region since the late eighteenth century often proclaimed the *Italianità* of Friuli and Venezia-Giulia at the linguistic expense of Friulians, Slovenes and the German burghers of Gorizia or Trieste.[55] Modern state borders should not, however, unduly impede research into early modern culture or create artificially fixed ethnic categories.[56] Extensive research by linguists in this region, most particularly in the hills north of Cividale del Friuli, indicates that there has been extensive admixture between languages and dialects in historic times.[57]

There is additional evidence provided by Ginzburg's text for a supra-ethnic cross-current in popular beliefs about fertility, focusing on Lake Cerknica as a putative meeting-place. At a *benandante* trial held in 1580–1 in Udine, a defendant revealed that on at least one of the 'four occasions' (i.e. the Quartember days), they went into 'German territory' (Habsburg lands) to Cerknica to undertake the necessary fight with witches:

[51] Valvasor reported the violation of corpses in Istria, which were beaten with staves until they bled and jerked as if they were still alive. The graves were then covered with earth and the peasants went away. Valvasor described this practice as being common (*'sehr gemein'*) in Istria, giving the example of corpses who had also had their heads cut off in 1672. He named the dead individually, which suggests that they were singled out for this violation and may, like the *benandanti*, have belonged to a special or liminal category within the community. (See Valvasor, *op. cit.*, vol. II, Buch VI, 335.)

[52] Ginzburg, *Night Battles*, *op. cit.*, 69.

[53] For details of Slovene settlement in this area see Rado L. Lenček, 'Od Tržiča do Trsta' in his *Ob Jadranu: Etnografski zapiski in studije* (Trieste, 1947), 61–2.

[54] Ginzburg, *The Night Battles*, *op. cit.*, 91: 'For his part, the youth lived in real terror of the witches: one night at someone else's house he began to tremble in the presense of a Slav, nor would he say a word that night. He explained the next day that he had not said anything the night before out of fear of the Slav who claimed to be a witch.'

[55] A reading of the correspondence of two noblewomen from the end of the seventeenth century gives an indication of the linguistic complexity of this area and the ambivalent position of German. (See Pavle Merkù (ed.), *Slovenska Plemiška Pisma* (Trieste, 1980).

[56] A good discussion of this issue in a wider context is to be found in Peter Burke's essay, 'Languages and anti-languages in early modern Italy' in his *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge, 1987), 79–94.

[57] See, for example, Jan Baudouin de Courtenay, *Materiali per la Dialettilogia e l'Etnographia Slava Meridionale/Materiali za Južnoslovansko Dialektologijo in Etnografijo* (Trieste, 1988).

> Sometimes we go to fight in a large meadow in the territory of Azzano, sometimes to a field close to Cuniano and other times on German territory in certain meadows (*certi prati*) nearby to Cirghnis (Cerknica). . . . We all go on foot and we *benandanti* fight with bundles of fennel and the witches with stalks of sorghum. . . . In the fighting we do, one time we fight over the wheat and all the other grains, another time over the livestock, and at other times over the vineyards. And so, on four occasions, we fight over all the fruits of the earth and for those things won by the *benandanti* that year there is abundance.[58]

In the summary of the trial proceedings over one year later, the events described above were repeated by the Father Inquisitor, when he delivered sentence:

> In addition, you dared to say many times, and dared to assert it before us, that all those born with a caul belong to that society, and when they reach age twenty they are obliged to join that society.
>
> That the days when you went forth were the Ember seasons of the year, at night between Thursdays and Fridays; that the places you were accustomed to go to do battle were the great field situated near Azzano, and sometimes in the countryside about Conegliano, and sometimes even in German lands near a place called Circnis (Cerknica), and that the first time you went it was to the great field.
>
> It is also our understanding that you said when you went to these places weddings were performed, with leaping about, drinking and eating, and that there was fighting with spears of fennel.[59]

Cerknica is mentioned twice, but spelt differently on each occasion. To Ginzburg's own list of 'clues' in interpreting a trial proceedings, such as coughs, splutters and red faces, it might be useful to consider at this point mistakes or variations in spelling.[60] Two spellings of the place-name of Cerknica, which is rather difficult to render into the Inquisition languages of Italian and Latin, suggest that although the place is known by name, its being outside the territory of Udine meant that its spelling had not been standardized by the scribes. The defendants in the trial records in the Biblioteca Arcivescovile for this period rarely spoke 'Italian', let alone Latin, many only knowing local dialects.

According to the evidence offered by Ginzburg, meadows (this *benandante*'s '*certi prati*') were important in fertility beliefs in a wider geographical area. Romanian *strigoi*, transformed into animals, 'move in spirit to the meadow at the end of the world'[61] and the 'meadow of the dead' also figures in Ossetian folklore.[62] It seems likely that any local agrarian cult would have regarded the meadows around Cerknica as a significant arena for the necessary battles with evil. Because of the variety of crops that the lakeside was able to provide, it may have represented the life of the Karst in microcosm, with the seasons and agrarian fertility thrown into high relief by the periodicity of the lake.

[58] ACAU, S. Uffizio, *Processus heresis*, no. 64 (trial for heresy, no. 64), 27 June 1580, Biblioteca Arcivescovile, Udine, Italy, reproduced in Ginzburg, *Night Battles*, *op. cit.*, 154–5.

[59] *ibid.*, 164.

[60] Carlo Ginzburg, 'The inquisitor as anthropologist' in his *Myths, Emblems, Clues*, *op. cit.*, 160–1.

[61] Ginzburg, *Ecstacies*, *op. cit.*, 166.

[62] *ibid.*, 163.

There are other tentative links between the practices of the peasants of Friuli and the Slovene peasants of Lake Cerknica. Baron Valvasor recorded that religious ceremonies also took place during the Quartember days before Whit, to bless the caves around Cerknica:

> At the peak or ridge of this mountain (i.e. Slivnica, the 'witches' mountain) is a hole of unknown depth, from which subterraneous vapours rise, that in turn produce noxious storms, thunderbolts, thunder and hail. Therefore the clergy of Cerknica consecrate that cave every year at Pentecost by a procession, that many people arrive for.[63]

These processions are in some way linked to popular rituals concerning fertility in Friuli. One *benandante* proclaimed: 'We fight with viburnum branches, that is, with the staff which we carry behind the crosses in the processions of the Rogation Days.'[64] According to Irene Portis Winner, the Pentecostal ceremonies survived until the twentieth century in the villages around Lake Cerknica. They are said to originate from the villagers' thanksgiving for the removal of rust (*rja*) from their crops.[65] The anthropologist recalled a ceremony that she attended on Whitsunday in June 1965 which had survived in a similar form since the seventeenth-century account of Baron Valvasor.[66] In Korte in Istria, the Pentecostal processions were originally intended to banish the werewolves (*vokoldek*), witches (*štriga*, *štrigon*) and dusk and dawn spirits (*mraki*, *jutrnje*), but survive nowadays as a leisurely family walk in the countryside.[67]

The beliefs of the *benandanti* of Friuli can also be linked to Lake Cerknica through the work of the nineteenth-century ethnologist, Emil Korytko, whose field-notebooks, written in the Cerknica area in the late 1830s, discuss the existence of the *Vukodlak* or *Volkodlak* (*volk* is the Slovene word for wolf and *volkodlak* means wolf-man).[68] According to Korytko, the wolf-man was also known as the *Vejdamez* in this area, a similar term to Valvasor's *Vedavez*. Indeed, in his writings about Istria, Valvasor used the terms *Vedavez* and *Strigon* (witch) interchangeably.[69] Gabor Klaniczay's view that the werewolf, whose caul enabled him to change into an animal shape, was an archaic equivalent of the malevolent spirit thus seems plausible in this instance.[70] Ginzburg has also interpreted beliefs about werewolves as a link between widely disparate geographical areas or what he calls a 'substratum of Slavic credences common to Friuli and Livonia'.[71]

Previous works of scholarship have highlighted a series of related beliefs concerning fertility over a wide area stretching from the Alps down to Macedonia and northwards towards the Baltic. Certainly one of the links between these areas are the remnants of *uralt* Slavic folk beliefs that were not entirely expunged by more recent orthodoxies. Slovene culture provides a geographical link between different areas and cultures, having a

[63] Valvasor's letter to Thomas Gale, 17 November 1687, published in Reisp, *op. cit.*, 5.

[64] Ginzburg, *Night Battles*, *op. cit.*, 156.

[65] Portis Winner, *op. cit.*, 200.

[66] *ibid.*, 200–1.

[67] Nada Morato, 'Praznična pomlad v Kortah', *Annales: Anali Koprskega primorja in bližnjih pokrajin*, II, 2 (1992), 326–7.

[68] *Korytkova Antologija I*, Mss 455/II, National and University Library (NUK), Ljubljana, Republic of Slovenia.

[69] Valvasor, *op. cit.*, vol. II, Buch VI, 335.

[70] Klaniczay, *op. cit.*, 135.

[71] Carlo Ginzburg, 'Freud, the wolf man and the werewolves' in his *Myths, Emblems, Clues*, *op. cit.*, 147.

common linguistic border with German, Hungarian, Friulian, Croatian, Istrian, Italian and (historically) with Istrian Vlach. For a clearer picture of a wider regional popular culture to emerge it will be necessary to carry out further research on the early modern period, particularly in the Slovene *Sprachraum*. The subaltern status of the Slovenes within the Habsburg monarchy undoubtedly influenced the subsequent historiography of the early modern period in particular, but it is high time that the status of the Slovenes as 'a people without history' was reviewed outside the borders of the Republic of Slovenia.[72]

Norman Cohn has written, with reference to Carlo Ginzburg's work, that 'the Friuli peasants did not really fight battles . . . they went into cataleptic trances, during which they *dreamed* that, mounted on boats and cats, they fought witches. All that happened physically was that they lay motionless in bed, as though dead, for a couple of hours.'[73] If this is true, how is it that Cerknica, in Slovene-speaking Habsburg territory, cropped up in a Friulian trial in 1581? Did Lake Cerknica have more symbolic than actual significance as a location for battles with evil forces over the future of crops? Was 'Cirghnis' a fecund word to conjure with against the evil forces that might destroy crops? Or did peasants from within the 'complex' (however widely that is construed) actually journey to the 'much spoken of'[74] lake, much as scientists and travellers were to do a century or so later?

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[72] I am thinking here of discourses from the late eighteenth onwards that characterized the Slovenes, among others, as '*geschichtslos*'. On this concept see Roman Rosdolsky, *Zur Nationalen Frage: Friedrich Engels und das Problem der 'Geschichtslosen' Voelker* (Berlin, 1979).

[73] Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons* (St Albans, 1976), 124.

[74] Brown, *op. cit.*, 1083.