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Convention of witches

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The *tregenda* [from northern Italian dialect: "that which shall be traversed"] refers to gatherings of witches and evil spirits coming together at night to carry out malevolent actions. While belief in these demonic assemblies was widespread across Europe, in the 16th-17th century Friuli, it took a singular form through its connection to the *benandanti* [lit. "good walkers"] – peasants disrupting these gatherings in spirit form to prevent the evil forces from affecting crops and livestock. Despite their antagonism toward the forces of evil, the *benandanti* soon fell under the Inquisition's eye and were subjected to interrogations and trials until assimilated into witchcraft: what for them had been battles against evil became participation in the diabolical sabbath. The following extract from *La vita in Friuli* by scholar Valentino Ostermann is an 1894 text that offers glimpses both of this now-completed assimilation and of the invisible interconnection between the sabbath imaginary and the Italian and Friulian physical landscape.

Keywords: Friuli, Italy, Witchcraft.

On Thursdays the witches hold their meetings and banquets – in a word, the famous *tregenda*. Like the witches of all countries, and similarly to those in the *Macbeth*, Friulian witches too gather in uninhabited, barren and deserted places. Famous ones in Italy are the walnut tree of Benevento,[1] Mount Paterno near Bologna, Mount Spinato toward Mirandola, the Serva in the Belluno area, and so forth.

In Friuli, worth remembering for extraordinary events and frequent apparitions are Mount Tenchia at Cercivento, Mount Sarte, the

Canino[2] – whose rocky crags are said to be the place of exile for the damned, while the meadows on the southern slope of Sarte would be reserved for the witches' dance.

From the cave called *la busate dei corvàz* [lit. "the cave of the crows'] in the Cornappo valley, you can see witches coming out who go down to dance behind the old shrine on the lower path, in the place known as *Cretàz* on the road that leads to Chalminis.[3] Countess Caterina Percoto[4] and, after her, Giosuè Carducci,[5] recalled the tregenda of Tenchia; likewise Del Torre mentioned those that would have as their stage the arid plateaus of the Carso (see Chapter I).[6]

It seems therefore that a central area, indicated by all as a common meeting place, doesn't exist in Friuli, or at least I couldn't locate it. Instead, one often hears tales that the witches gather in the vast heathlands of our river-torrents, near the uninhabited ruins of some ancient castle, deep in the most remote woods, or in some wilder wasteland, far from dwellings and frequented places.

The *tregenda* is lit by black pitch candles, or torches made from splintered resinous pine, which give more smoke than light. Witches and sorcerers attend, flocking from all sides riding broomsticks or on the back of little devils, or carried by those born with the caul[7] and destined to become witches or sorcerers themselves.[8]

She anoints and smears herself
All naked in the hearth's field,
To go under the bearded one's chin
With the lit broom to Benevento.[9]

Where at night to the walnut tree had gathered
All the witches, also on the goat,
The devils, and with Bau the Biliorse[10]
To dance, to sing, to make storms.[11]

They fell under the claws of the Holy Office for having attended the *tregenda*:

In 1624 Silvestro, a miller from Treviso, and his wife Paolina, living in the fortress of Palma, were accused of flying through the air above the clouds. This was so true that the accuser, along with Antonio della Gatta, an innkeeper in the fortress, had followed them and seen them come down and enter the house of Antonio Barbiere in Borgo d'Udine. Another time, the same couple were seen in non-human form. Moreover, Paolina had asked the same accuser to make her a widow, promising in return to use her spells to make him a widower too, so they could be free to marry each other.

Everyone who attends the tregenda must bring some poisonous herb as a gift to the master devil who sits in majesty presiding over the gathering.[12] He receives homage from his followers and even allows some the honour of kissing him – not on the mouth, but the corresponding opening on the other end, which, being a devil, amounts to the same thing.

With the poisonous herbs he has received as gifts, he will then sprinkle the whole assembly with devil's piss, using the sprinkler with his left hand. The devil usually appears as a goat or dog. In the center of the circle a cauldron boils where they throw the bundle of herbs that served as the sprinkler, adding toads, spiders, scorpions, vipers, salamanders, bats, as well as children stolen by witches.

The witches then collect the foam to make their magic ointment. While the cauldron boils, they dance – dance wildly in a circle, and in that whirlwind there's no law or manners, complete shameless communism reigns, everyone demands – no one refuses – orgies between wizards and witches, between witches and devils that would even surpass the debaucheries of Tiberius and Nero.

When the dances and the other practices are finished, the cauldron is overturned, and the dancers refresh themselves with the exquisite stew. As dawn approaches, all return to their homes through the air, as they came; and woe if in that flight they should hear the morning sound of a bell or the song of a rooster, or let slip from their mouth without noticing an invocation to the name of God, Christ or the

Madonna – they would risk falling to the ground and breaking their necks.

In the Registry so often cited, there are numerous trials for witchcraft; besides those reported I also find the following:[13]

1582. Teofilo Buri of Pieris in the area of Monfalcone for being a *benandante* and for attending the Thursday dance; summoned to appear, he flees the country, and nothing more is known of him.

1595. Caterina, wife of Domenico, was likewise accused because she had confided to her own mother-in-law Tadea da Mortegliano that she was a witch and went together with her husband every Thursday to the gathering, where she brawled with the other witches.

1599. Florida, wife of Alessandro Basilio, notary of Udine, besides other charges mentioned elsewhere, was tried for having declared that she too was a witch and went every Thursday to walk with the dead.

1600. Pascutta Agrigolante of San Martino di Terzo who boasted of being a *benandante* and of going to fight with the *benandanti*, and Bernarda wife of Francesco Peressut of the village of Maruzzis, who made the same boasts, saying she went to fight with the *benandanti* riding a hare, and that she cast her spells in the Gorizia area, because there witches are punished less severely.

1601. Gasparina the blind woman who boasted of speaking with God and of going to the tregenda.

1622. A boy in the service of Dr. Locatelli of Udine for having said he was a *benandante* and that, riding a dog, he attended the *tregenda* where he fought with fennel branches.14

In the same year Leonardo Badan or Badovino of Galliano because he boasted of being a very expert *benandante*, of knowing the witches, some of whom he named, and of taking part in the Thursday battles.

Thus in 1645 Zanutta, daughter of the late Andrea del Bon, was prosecuted for having declared that she does not weave on Thursdays; that if she had woven even for just a moment, the oxen would not have slept; and this fact was confirmed by witness testimonies.

In 1647 Sebastiano Menossi of Zugliano spontaneously confessed to being a *benandante* and to having attended the witches' gathering for 16 months.

These were dreams, aberrations of sick minds, hallucinations of brains that no longer functioned properly.16

Footnotes & references

[1] The Walnut of Benevento was an ancient tree located in the locality of Ripa delle Janare [lit. 'Shore of the witches'], near the Sabato River flowing through the provinces of Avellino and Benevento in southern Italy.

Janare itself is a local term for 'witches', possibly derived from either "dianaria" ['priestess of Diana'], also identified as Hecate (the goodees of the underworld); or from Latin "ianua" ['door'], since these witches were believed to slip into houses by crawling under doors. To prevent this, people would place a broom made of millet near the door, which would compel the witch to spend the night counting the twigs. Similarly, bags of salt placed outside doors would attract the witch's attention as she couldn't resist counting the grains until having to disappear at dawn.

Regarding the Benevento walnut tree where the witches gathered, in an earlier period, it was the setting of pagan ritual practices by the Lombards who settled there from the 6th century onwards. These included the hanging of sacrificed goat skins on the tree, an unsettling practice which

may have contributed to the birth of the legends surrounding it. Elsewhere in his book, Otterman notes that 'Resting under walnut trees makes it very easy to become bewitched, and the danger is even greater on Thursdays when witches go to perch on their branches.' p. 215.

[2] The Canino is an imposing massif of limestone and dolomite nature located between Friuli Venezia Giulia (north-east of Italy) and Slovenia. It's known for its extreme meteorological characteristics, most notably its very high precipitation. It is perhaps this combination of intense atmospheric phenomena and the consequent karst activity that has made the mountain a place of legends, in particular the place of the souls of the damned, who, according to a legend, are forced to work incessantly to demolish the mountain. Valentino Ostermann himself speaks of it in *Il Monte Canino e I dannati. Tradizioni Friulane* (1885) Cronaca della Soc. Alpina Friulana, 4: 117-121, tip. Doretti Udine 1885. A passage from an 1889 book titled *Leggende delle Alpi* ['Legends of the Alps'] by Italian author Maria Savi Lopez, reads: "As soon as the night falls, they, laden with heavy chains, begin to hit with pickaxes, for their task is to break up the rocks of the mountain; and this struggle against the cliffs of the Alps is as terrible as that against the glaciers." (our translation), p. 203.

[3] The cave is still listed with this name in the Italian official public records (it can be seen here: https://catastogrotte.regione.fvg.it/scheda/17-Busa_dai_Corvazz). While we couldn't locate the shrine that the author mentions, it seems to still be still active in the local collective imaginary. According to one legend, a treasure was buried in this location by the witches and, once uncovered, it would reveal a gravestone with the inscription 'You did well to turn me over, because my ribs were hurting'. See A. Zenatelli *Forse non tutti sanno che in Friuli c'era un posto dove ballavano le streghe* available here: https://www.friulioggi.it/cultura/curiosita-friuli/cretaz-streghe-friuli/ [last accessed 1 June 2025]

[4] The author must be referring to this text by 19th century Italian writer and poet Caterina Percoto's *Lis Striis di Gjermanie* ['the German witches'] (1863), originally written in Friulian dialect. Available in Friulian and Italian at https://www.dolomitiunesco.info/attivita/leggende-dalle-dolomiti-furlan-arlef

[5] The author might be referring to *In Carnia* by Carducci, available in English here: https://ia801307.us.archive.org/0/items/cihm_992163/cihm_992163.pdf (p. 86) [last accessed 1 June 2025]

[6] At page 99, Ostermann cites an author named Del Torre who published a text titled *Contadiniel* [lit. 'peasant'/'farmer'] in 1888. In this text, Del Torre speaks of a battle between 'transmontane' witches (likely referring to witches from north of the Alps – perhaps Austrian, German, or other Central European witches) and an alliance between witches of northeastern Italy and Istria, in a sort of 'Carsian' geographical solidarity.

[7] Here those "born with a caul" are precisely the so-called "*benandanti*" (literally 'good walkers'), figures from 16th-17th century Friulian folklore who claimed to be able to leave their bodies in spirit form and go fight the forces of evil to protect crops. As known, the expression "born with a caul" refers to children who are born still wrapped in the amniotic sac and is traditionally considered a sign of good fortune and/or special abilities. In the specific Friulian context, it is linked to the role and destiny of being a benandante. In the fundamental text on the phenomenon of the good walkers, *The Night Battles* (1985), Carlo Ginzburg reports the testimony of the benandante Gasparutto: "About a year before the angel appeared to me, my mother gave me the caul in which I had been born, saying that she had it baptized with me ... and she told me that I was born a benandante, and that when I grew up I would go forth at night, and that I must wear it on my person, and that I would go with the benandanti to fight the witches". See C. Ginzburg, *The Nights Battles* (1985), p. 15.

[8] In these words by Ostermann, the assimilation between *benandanti* and witches that had been constructed in previous centuries through the interrogations and trials of the Inquisition emerges clearly. However, this was precisely a forced assimilation by the Inquisition itself. In the first interrogations, some *benandanti* actually narrated their own deeds with pride, convinced they were on the right side and served as protectors of the Christian community. The account of Battista Moduco, reported by Ginzburg, is emblematic: 'I am a benandante 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, and the witches of the devil; we fight each other, we with bundles of fennel and they with sorghum stalks.' See C. Ginzburg, *The Night Battles* (1985), p. 6.

[9] For an evolution of the walnut tree in Benevento see D. Moretti, 'The circulation of and exchange of ideas, myths, legends, and oral

traditions in the witchcraft trials of Italy', in M. Montesano [ed.] *Folklore, Magic, and Witchcraft*, Routeledge, 2022

[10] *Bau* and *Biliorse* are folk terms that are not immediate to translate; the dictionary on old Italian mentions Bau as "A word used to frighten children, as if it meant something terrible", so it seems to occupy a liminal space between a scary word and an undefined frightening presence/source of fear (most likely, 'bogey'); the *biliorsa* is defined as "fantastical beast".

[11] What you've just read is from *Il Malmantile Racquistato* [the 'Malmantile fortress reconquered'], a mock-heroic epic poem by Florentine painter and poet Lorenzo Lippi, first published posthumously in 1676.

[12] Here too, the grip of Inquisition trials on the evolution of sabbatical imagery in relation to the *benandanti* is evident. While the *benandanti* made no mention of the devil's presence, this was inevitably suggested during interrogations, as in the one between Fra Felice and Paolo Gasparutto thus reported by Ginzburg: "'Does this angel conduct you where that other one is seated on that beautiful throne?' In Gasparutto's tale, needless to say, there had been no mention of devils or thrones. This time too the reply was prompt and tinged with exasperation: 'But he is not of our company, God forbid that we should get involved with that false enemy! ... It is the witches that have the beautiful thrones'. The inquisitor persisted: 'Did you ever see witches by that beautiful throne?' And Gasparutto, gesturing with his arms, sensing that he had been caught in the inquisitor's trap: 'No sir, we did nothing but fight!'. See C. Ginzburg, *The Night Battles* (1985), p. 11

[13] For an extensive discussion on the trials against Florida and other *benandanti*, see Carlo Ginzbur's *The Night Battles*.

[14] Fennel stalks were the typical weapon used by the *benandanti* in their nocturnal battles. From one of the trials: "We all go on foot, and we *benandanti* fight with bundles of fennel, and the witches with stalks of sorghum". Fennel may have been a symbol of fertility, and also had an apotropaic function: "Questioned: do you eat fennel and garlic? he replied: Yes, father we do, because they serve against the witches." See C. Ginzburg, *The Night Battles* (1985), p. 154. When referencing the fennel plant, Ostermann, drawing from inquisition trials, identifies it as a rod wielded by witches in their sabbaths, so without any distinction between *benandanti* and malevolent forces: "In a Holy Inquisition trial, it is stated that witches battle each other using fennel stalks as weapons" (our translation). See V. Ostermann. *La vita in Friuli*, p. 195.

[15] For an anthropological analysis of the proliferation of these beliefs, and of their operating at the threshold between different ontological spaces—the domestic and the supernatural, the visible and the invisible, the individual and the collective – see the essential stidy by Carlo Severi's book The Chimera Principle, Chicago: Hau Books. (2007) 2012; particularly the section 'Projection and Belief' p. 228-244, available here: https://haubooks.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Carlo-Severi-The-Chimera-Principle-An-Anthropology-of-Memory-and-Imagination-Foreword-by-David-Graeber.pdf [last accessed 1 June 2025]

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Translated extract from Ostermann, Valentino. *La vita in Friuli; usi, costumi, credenze, pregiudizî e superstizioni popolari*. Udine: Domenico del Bianco Editore, 1894. Available (Italian only) here.

Further reading

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Opening image: *The Witches* by Hans Baldung, 1510, (detail), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, US