



to do battle against the forces of Hell and to bring back to the surface all the produce they could carry (Thiess recalled that he himself had recovered 'much barley, oats and rye') to ensure prosperity in the town.

In the course of their raids, the werewolves would engage in carnivalesque feasting of their own. Thiess told the court that they 'ran about as wolves' and seized 'whatever horses and livestock' fell to them. Then they would gather – as many as twenty or thirty werewolves at a time – along the road to roast and eat the flesh of the animals they had taken. This intrigued the court: since these men had taken the form of wolves, why did they not eat the flesh raw? Thiess insisted that they cooked and ate in the manner of men, and that though they lacked hands, or for that matter knives, the werewolves would use their paws to pierce the meat on spits, and tear it off with their teeth. By the time the feast was over, they had turned back into men.

His story prompted appalled questioning from the judges. Was he in league with the Devil? While elsewhere Thiess's story shifted under questioning, on this point he remained firm. The werewolves were not servants of Satan: rather, the Devil hated them and did his best to drive them away, 'as if they were dogs, for the werewolves are God's hounds'. The sorcerers, sworn enemies of the werewolves, would feast with the Devil and did everything he asked them to, 'therefore their souls belong to him'. By contrast, the werewolves sought to benefit the people. 'For if they did not exist,' Thiess explained, 'all the world's prosperity would depart.'

The court summoned the local pastor, who admonished Thiess. What he had done was a sin against God and he would be damned if he did not repent. Thiess insisted again that he and his fellow werewolves had acted in God's service; their actions meant they would surely go to Heaven. When the pastor rejected this, Thiess lost his temper. Why was he being prosecuted, he demanded, when he 'was not the first and would not be the last who had practiced these same things'. In the face of the court's 'alternating kindness and threats', he finally said that 'if now would have it that he should not do this anymore, he would give it up henceforward, because he was old and feeble.'

The court struggled to know what to do. The law no longer allowed judges to use torture as part of their questioning – something that may have emboldened Thiess in giving his testimony. They heard that the pastor had warned him off his 'devilish deeds' before, describing the everlasting punishment he would receive. Thiess had agreed to stop – it was necessary if he was to be allowed to marry – but had since reneged on his promise. The judges asked if his pact with the Devil was so strong that he couldn't break it, and again he denied any such deal. He was, he told them, 'God's hound', thief of the sorcerers' stolen goods and Satan's enemy.

It took a year for a judgment to be reached. Thiess was found guilty of having 'for many years . . . showed himself to be a werewolf'; his punishment was to be flogged in front of his fellow peasants. Since he was an old man, however, he would not receive the full quota of lashes. No record survives as to whether, before his death, Thiess did as he claimed he would and passed on his power in the same way it had been given to him, by breathing into a drink and offering it to his victim with the words: 'It will be for you as it was for me.'

Writing in 1555, the Swedish archbishop Olaus Magnus discussed the belief held by some

people in Prussia, Lithuania and Livonia (an area equivalent to much of today's Latvia and Estonia) that every winter groups of men transformed into wolves and attacked the property of landowners. The wolf-men would assault homes, make off with animals and invade beer cellars. After drinking all the beer, they would pile the empty mugs one on top of another, 'in which practice', Magnus noted, 'they differ from natural and genuine wolves'. In 1615, the burgomaster of Riga, Heinrich von Ulenbrock, lamented what he saw as the credulity of Livonian peasants, whom he described as having been driven by madness into forming a diabolical sect while claiming to be the servants of God. In 1550, Hermann Witekind, a Livonian himself and a professor at the university in Riga, reported having met an imprisoned werewolf, who told him a complicated story about his pursuit of a witch.

Witekind's account spread throughout Europe, reaching the reformer Philip Melancthon in Wittenberg, as well as his son-in-law, Caspar Peucer, who recorded the story in 1560. Peucer's reference to werewolves as the enemies of witches then found its way into the work of the Italian bishop Simone Maioli, from where it was borrowed by the French judge Pierre de Lancre for his *Tableau de l'inconstance des mauvais anges et démons*, published in Paris in 1612. De Lancre turned to the Livonian evidence (though he thought the story might have come from Reggio rather than Riga) to help him explain the case of Jean Grenier, the French teenager tried as a werewolf in 1603. Grenier told the judge that 'he had been a werewolf and therefore he had run across the country by order of the Lord of the Forest.' These narratives were persistent. Fifteen years before Thiess's trial, the German theologian Christian Kortholt had recounted the story of a German man in Livonia who had almost drunk from a cup given to him by a peasant. The peasant had spoken some words in the local vernacular, which the German interpreted as a blessing. Just in time, his friends snatched the cup from his hands and proceeded to beat the peasant to a pulp. The baffled German was told that 'if the man had charmed that drink, by evening he would surely turn into a werewolf.'

The trial of Old Thiess and the werewolf stories of premodern Europe are recurring motifs in the work of Carlo Ginzburg, and they tell us something about that work's ambition and breadth of reference. When *History Workshop Journal* published a Ginzburg essay in 1980, the translator, Anna Davin, explained that 'this article by an Italian comrade and historian is very different from anything we have included . . . before. It unselfconsciously draws on philosophy, quotes Latin and ranges across societies and periods in a way which is extraordinary – even shocking – to the English reader.' Like many historians, I remember reading Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* as an undergraduate and being astonished at the way he wove the testimony of a 16th-century Italian miller into an argument for the survival of pre-Christian peasant beliefs, linking Counter-Reformation religious unorthodoxy to the Vedic myths. A pioneer in microhistory, Ginzburg is often attracted to significant words or details, which, held up to the light, can reveal unexpected facts and challenge accepted narratives. He describes this co-authored book, *Old Thiess, a Livonian Werewolf*, as 'a historical experiment that starts from a single document and explores its possible contexts'.

Thiess made his first appearance in Ginzburg's work in *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the 16th and 17th Centuries* (1966), a book that opens with testimonies given to the Inquisition by 16th-century peasants from the Friuli region of Italy. They claimed to be members of the *benandanti* secret society, whose magical practices included nighttime battles against witches and warlocks. The *benandanti* defended themselves with fennel stalks and were the servants of Christ, while the witches and warlocks who attacked them with

sorghum stalks were in the service of the Devil. The town crier, Battista Moduco, explained what was at stake in these night battles: 'If we are the victors there is abundance that year, but if we lose there is famine.'

For Ginzburg, the similarities between the Thiess case and the activities of the *benandanti* half a continent away suggested a set of shared beliefs. 'What we have here,' he wrote in *The Night Battles*, 'is a single agrarian cult, which, to judge from these remnants surviving in places as distant [as] Livonia and the Friuli, must have been diffused in an earlier period over a much vaster area, perhaps the whole of central Europe.' It's a typically grand Ginzburgian claim. In *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath* (1989), he argued that in both examples 'we sense the attempt to describe an ecstatic experience perceived as absolutely real.' By characterising Thiess's lycanthropic experiences as ecstatic, Ginzburg could posit a set of traditions linking the Slovenian and Istrian *kresnik*, the Croatian *mogut*, the *burkudzäutä* of Ossetia, the *táltos* of Hungary, the Dalmatian *negromanat* and the Montenegrin *zduhač*, all figures who were 'destined to fight . . . against sorcerers and vampires, chasing away evil spells or protecting the cross'. Ginzburg argues for a 'family likeness' across these groups, discerning a deep stratum of old peasant beliefs beneath the Christian façade of modernising Europe.

Bruce Lincoln, Ginzburg's co-author, has long been more sceptical about the Thiess case. He focuses on the social realities of early modern Livonia, as exemplified in the courtroom, where the powerful were almost all 'members of the German elite who constituted the upper stratum of Livonian society', as they had done since the 13th century, while those under interrogation, indigenous Latvians and Estonians, were classed as *Undeutsche*. In Lincoln's telling, werewolf beliefs were used to show that the Livonian peasantry were credulous, unchristian and in need of the firm hand of their rulers: 'A steady stream of *Undeutsche* defendants whom they could successfully prosecute as witches and werewolves permitted the elite to understand and represent themselves as continuing the noble – but interminable – work of advancing civilisation, morality and the True Faith, thereby legitimating their position and power.'

In this context, Thiess's testimony to the court can be seen as a form of resistance, all the more powerful because he doesn't deny the charges, but instead rejects their definition. Yes, he was a werewolf, he had been to Hell and seen the Devil – but the judges didn't understand what that meant. Lincoln casts the trial as a tussle for control of the werewolf discourse; it is this that makes Thiess's testimony 'an exceptionally revealing example of a resistance that was simultaneously religious, legal, cultural and political'. In a striking analogy, he invokes the strategies of Black defendants in US courts, 'who are subjected to all manner of negative stereotypes and accusations rooted in the prejudice not only of the judge but of the institutions and dominant culture the judge represents'. Some defendants, he writes, 'embrace the negative stereotypes and invert them, saying "Yes, I am a bad motherfucker . . . but that's not what you think it is. It's the name you folks give to someone who defends his people against forces like you."' Thiess was praised by many of his fellow peasants.

Lincoln concludes that Thiess's story isn't evidence of a transnationally shared set of peasant beliefs, but of a challenge to the social structure in late 17th-century Latvia:

The nobility owned livestock, ate livestock and preyed on others who were weaker. The peasantry ate plants, obeyed the orders given to them by the nobility, deferred to the nobility and tried to avoid becoming their prey. But if the peasants threatened to become predators – to take, kill and eat livestock – they would have been behaving like nobles and the elite would have perceived and described this as ‘acting like wolves’.

The ‘hounds of God’ Thiess describes seem to Lincoln ‘agents of restorative justice, returning property, blessings, profits and the means of production to their rightful owners’. At the same time, Thiess depicted Hell as a place not far from his own parish, on land owned by the elite, where the Devil hoarded produce stolen from the peasantry: this is Satan as a landlord. After all, when the court asked whether there were Germans among Thiess’s band of werewolves, he responded that ‘the Germans don’t join their company; rather, they have a special Hell of their own.’

Both Lincoln and Ginzburg first encountered Thiess in the work of Otto Höfler, extracts from whose *Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen* (1934) are reproduced in translation. Höfler’s reading of the case was rooted in Nazi ideology: like Hermann von Bruiningk, who first published the trial transcript in 1924, Höfler believed that he detected traces of ‘Aryan’ religion in the case and drew connections between the Livonian werewolves and the all-male secret societies and cultic associations known as *Männerbünde*. For Höfler, the shared ecstasies of the *Männerbünde*, their rituals and costumes and shocking acts, offered an insight into the genesis of the German state. The actions of the Livonian werewolves differed from those of the *Männerbünde* in only one respect: they didn’t display ‘the most distinctive gift of the Nordic race – its state-building power’.

Lincoln notes that ‘it is not often one has the privilege of hearing a werewolf . . . explain his practices, beliefs and very being.’ This book brings together talks, papers and letters and is more like the dossier of a criminal investigation than an academic study. In the file presented to us, we find Thiess’s own statements, the theories (sometimes wildly off-beam) of those previous investigators, and a dialogue between interpretations that extends from the 16th century to the 21st century. In a transcribed conversation between Ginzburg and Lincoln from 2017, the two men revisit the case and pit their theories against each other. The book maintains the tension between viewpoints: neither is wholly convinced by the other, but we see the sifting of evidence and testing of hypotheses – a process that is usually obscured in works that focus on findings or which are driven by a single argument.

At its heart, this is a debate about the limits of comparison. Ginzburg argues in defence of broad, ambitious comparisons that link disparate subjects. Lincoln is more sceptical, arguing that in spite of its attractiveness, most work in that tradition has failed. Ginzburg the microhistorian writes that ‘I am strongly in favour of a close-up approach to a single case – Old Thiess, for instance – but we cannot ignore the multiple contexts in which the single case is inscribed.’ Like philologists who trace the transmission of texts over centuries, historians can, he argues, point to ‘conjunctive anomalies’, shared features of beliefs separated by time and geography, which seem too similar to have occurred by chance. He argues for the importance of risk-taking in scholarship, where the rewards might be the greatest.

In response, Lincoln doesn’t deny that the stories of Old Thiess and the *benandanti* bear comparison. He accepts that they share morphological similarities, but rather than being

emboldened by the strangeness and potential of the documents, he takes from them 'an object lesson in prudence, suspicion of risk and caution in the face of seductive hypotheses'. He is wistful about the temptations of the grand argument, but 'more resigned to frustration, modesty and a sense of tragic loss' in his approach to the historical record. The furthest Lincoln is willing to go in comparing Thiess and the *benandanti* is to see in both cases 'persons of a subaltern group, accused by a powerful court', who 'respond to the court by affirming their own dignity and benevolence'. No deep shared beliefs, no agrarian cult. As 'for the werewolves of Livonia,' he says. 'I'm not convinced there ever were any werewolves of Livonia.'