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Nocturnal Journeys and Ritual Dances in Bernardino of Siena

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Abstract
This article takes its starting point in a story from a famous fifteenth-century sermon against sorcery by Bernardino of Siena. The story involves a solitary page travelling through a rural area who finds a group of people dancing on a threshing floor; at dawn, all the dancers vanish but one one girl to whom the page is holding fast. This girl is not treated by Bernardino as a sorceress, though the larger context of the story makes the absence of the perception of sorcery something of a puzzle. In search of possible origins for this story, the author examines an array of parallels, suggesting ultimately that Bernardino's story could be linked to actual folk practices that involved nocturnal dancing.

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Nocturnal Journeys and Ritual Dances in Bernardino of Siena

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In late September 1427, the Franciscan preacher Bernardino of Siena delivered a famous sermon directed, in part, against witchcraft in his native city. Calling on the Sienese to come forward and accuse any practitioners of sorcery known to them, he described in particular a series of trials that his preaching had helped to precipitate the previous year in Rome. There, he asserted, one of the accused had confessed to murdering thirty children by draining their blood. She had spared sixty more, she claimed, but for each one she had been forced to offer a placating sacrifice to the devil, typically the limb of some animal. She had also killed her own child and ground his body into a powder that she used in her nefarious practices. She then described how she would regularly meet with other Roman witches before dawn on the piazza in front of St. Peter’s basilica, where they would anoint themselves with unguents that they believed transformed them into cats. Thus Bernardino painted a picture of intensely diabolized, conspiratorial, and cultic witchcraft of the sort that, in other contexts at about this same time and in other sources produced just north of the Alps,

Thanks to my colleagues Jana Byars and David Hollander for help with some tricky Italian passages, to Karl Appuhn for initial advice, and to Claire Fanger and Richard Kieckhefer for helpful critiques.


Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft (Summer 2013)
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would figure in the earliest imaginings of the witches’ sabbath. Of course, Bernardino did not entirely reflect those northern stereotypes. His was a more Mediterranean form of witchcraft, notably incorporating elements of the vampiric strega. Yet the larger frameworks within which his ideas can be understood are, in this instance, fairly evident.

The Sienese friar followed his account of the witches of Rome, however, with another story featuring a nocturnal gathering that has proven more befuddling to scholars. This tale centered on a page in service to a Roman cardinal who was traveling south to Benevento at night. Along the way, he saw a group of people dancing in a field on a threshing floor. The sight initially filled him with fear, but eventually he approached and even joined in the dancing. The revelry lasted until the ringing of the matin bell, when the entire assembly vanished in an instant, except for one girl whom the page held fast despite her struggles. He took her home with him and kept her there for three years, during which time she never spoke a word, although somehow it was discovered that she came not from the region south of Rome but from “Schiavonia.” Bernardino concluded his report by lamenting how terrible it was that a young girl should be taken away from her father and mother in this way. Whether he meant her abduction and imprisonment by the Roman page or her initial transport from Schiavonia to Benevento is unclear, although immediately after relating this story in his sermon he again exhorted his Sienese audience to exterminate all witches, presumably in reaction to what they had just heard, even though witches are never mentioned in the story itself.

There is much to puzzle over in this brief segment of sermon, and because Bernardino stands at such a crucial moment in the elite construction of diabolical, conspiratorial stereotypes of witchcraft, it is certainly worth trying to determine what he may have had in mind as he preached. Here I will focus on two elements of this story that I find to be both particularly obscure and


potentially revelatory; namely, the fact that the nocturnal dance supposedly took place on a threshing floor (or possibly in an enclosed farmyard, although that seems unlikely⁶), and that the kidnapped girl came from Schiavonia, literally the slave-land, but probably more appropriately rendered as Slavonia, that is, the “Slav-lands” of the Balkans.⁷ Together these elements suggest that, among other components that he incorporated into his notions of witchcraft, Bernardino may have had some conception of nocturnal rituals connected generally to agricultural fertility and the insurance of plentiful harvests, perhaps even rites related to the later practices (or claims) of Carlo Ginzburg’s famous benandanti. The Slavic rim of Friuli lay, after all, on the brink of the Balkans, and was often designated by Italians as Schiavonia.

After uncovering the Venetian Inquisition’s apparently sudden discovery of the Friulian benandanti in the late sixteenth century, Ginzburg himself set about trying to locate similar beliefs and behaviors in other regions and in earlier periods of history: to some extent in his original Night Battles, and then in his broader study of the witches’ sabbath, Ecstacies.⁸ Especially in the latter book, he focused on vast mythological systems, ultimately tracing patterns and archetypes from early modern Friuli and elsewhere in Western Europe all the way to the shamans of the archaic Siberian steppe. This approach has been both emulated and criticized.⁹ In particular, many scholars have found fault with Ginzburg’s emphasis on shamanism as the connective tissue holding together diverse and widely scattered practices. Instead, they propose that benandanti-like behavior, and even the benandanti themselves, are better explained by more immediate structures, such as systems of magical healing, and that even when ecstatic or visionary practices are evident, they are not really shamanistic in nature.¹⁰

⁶. Bernardino, Prediche volgari, 2:1012, states that the page “vidde in su una aia ballare molta gente.” Aia can mean either an enclosed farmyard or a threshing floor. The implication that the dancers were “up on” the aia seems to indicate that in this case it meant a slightly raised threshing circle, probably set in the fields. While William Haywood, The “Ensamples” of Fra Filippo: A Study of Medieval Siena (Siena, 1901), 312, translates aia as “threshing-floor,” Mormando, Preacher’s Demons, 67, renders the phrase as “dancing in an open field.”

⁷. Both Haywood and Mormando agree in this translation.


¹⁰. For an extended reconsideration of the benandanti, see Franco Nardon, Benandanti e inquisitori nel Friuli del Seicento (Trieste, 1999). Other insightful critiques
I too will pursue a narrower set of connections here, reconstructing a
network of beliefs and practices that existed on the fringes of the Italian
world, certainly present in the early modern era and most likely in the late
medieval period as well, which may have informed Bernardino’s account.
Because the Sienese friar will remain my underlying focus throughout, I will
be less concerned with the actual nature of the practices I recount (shamanis-
tic or otherwise) than with how they might have been perceived and put to
use by an educated cleric. I will, however, suggest that physically real peasant
rites and ritual dances, rather than purely visionary spirit battles, may have
helped shape some of the friar’s thought. As is already apparent through my
liberal use of “mays” and “mights,” this tighter focus will still yield only
suggestive conclusions, not definitive ones. Nevertheless, to whatever extent
we can trace certain notions of nighttime revels and fertility rites, better
known from studies focused on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, into
the formative period of the early fifteenth century, the more fully we may
come to understand how varied stereotypes of diabolical, conspiratorial
witchcraft actually emerged.

We can begin to delve into the mysteries of Bernardino’s brief account
by considering its setting, which at first glance would seem to require little
explanation. Particularly in the early modern period, the region around
Benevento was to become a famously witchy place, a veritable “Italian
Brocken.” Already in Bernardino’s day, in fact, an accused witch had con-
fessed at her 1428 trial in Todi (only two years after the Franciscan had
preached there) that she often flew to an assembly of witches near Benevento.
That gathering, however, took place beneath a mythic walnut tree, the
famous noce di Benevento, which would become an iconic element of Italian
sabbaths. If Bernardino knew that particular detail of developing folklore,
include Willem de Blecourt, “Spüren einen Volkskultur oder Dämonisierung?
Kritische Bemerkungen zu Ginzburgs ‘Benandanti,’” *Kea: Zeitschrift für Kulturwissen-
11. Gustav Henningsen, “‘The Ladies from Outside’: An Archaic Pattern of the
Witches’ Sabbath,” in *Early Modern European Witchcraft: Centres and Peripheries*, ed.
36–38. According to Paolo Portone, *Il noce di Benevento: La stregoneria e l’Italia del sud*
(Milan, 1990), 33, this trial record is one of the earliest testimonies to the “diffusion of
the Beneventian myth.” On the walnut tree’s continued resonance in the sixteenth
and seventeenth centuries, see David Gentilcore, *From Bishop to Witch: The System of
he deliberately omitted it, specifying instead that his nocturnal dance took place on a threshing floor. In fact, his account does not show "any typical element of the later representation of the Beneventian sabbath." Leaving aside the specific connotations later ascribed to the location Bernardino selected, therefore, we can turn to broader structures of belief associated with harvests and general fertility as a possible explanation for his placement of suspicious nighttime revels on a threshing floor.

From Ginzburg’s benandanti in the north to the “Ladies from Outside” studied by Gustav Henningsen in Sicily, folkloric beliefs and practices associated with fertility and intermingling with ideas of witchcraft have been identified across Italy in the early modern period, and they obviously had medieval precedents. In the late 1300s, for example, women on trial in Milan confessed to attending nighttime assemblies led by “Signora Oriente,” where they feasted on animals that were magically resurrected at the end of the banquet. Jeffrey Russell declared that “these trials are the best example before those of the benandanti of how the Inquisition interpreted strange fertility rites as witchcraft.” Such assemblies were in fact well known to clerical authorities who wrote against sorcery and superstition throughout Western Christendom. In the thirteenth century, William of Auvergne had condemned belief in “Dame Abundia,” while in the fourteenth century the inquisitor Bernard Gui had warned about the so-called “Good Ones,” whom he described as “fairy women” (fatae mulieres) who roamed the night. These women were thought to enter houses and to ensure health and fertility if they found them in good order, or if they were appeased by offerings of food and drink. Roughly contemporary with Bernardino in the early fifteenth century, such beliefs were condemned by (inter alia) the Heidelberg theologian Nikolaus of Jauer, the Viennese

the Sacred in Early Modern Terra d’Otranto (Manchester, 1992), 239; Henningsen, “Ladies from Outside,” 197.

13. Montesano, Supra acqua, 150.


theologians Johannes Nider and Thomas Ebendorfer, and the anonymous English vernacular poem *Dives and Pauper*.16

Such beliefs in night-traveling women and the mythical figures who led them—Abundia, Oriente, Holda, Herodias, Perchta—were widespread in medieval Europe, with long and complex (if not inscrutable) histories.17 Nider, for example, drew his account of them in part from the thirteenth-century *Legenda aurea* version of the life of the early-fifth-century saint Germanus of Auxerre.18 They also undoubtedly informed the famous early-tenth-century canon *Episcopi* and its condemnation of women who believed themselves to travel at night in the train of the goddess Diana (or in later versions Herodias).19 Bernardino, however, appears to have been largely unaffected by or uninterested in such general mythic structures. Whenever he addressed nocturnal travels or assemblies (aside from his brief account of the dance near Benevento), he stuck close to the canon *Episcopi*, stressing its central point that such nighttime journeys were entirely illusory, and he made no evident references to possible fertility-myth undertones such as offerings of food or plentiful feasts, which are not found directly in the text of the canon.20 He did mention, in an earlier sermon of his 1427 Siena cycle, a terrible sect called “the people of the keg” (*quelli del barilotto*). Our ears prick up here, because a fairly standard element of the night-travel/fertility mythic structure was that these nocturnal bands would, when returning from their revels, enter houses and either drink from or sometimes urinate into wine casks (which was a component of the benandanti story as well). Bernardino’s


people of the keg did not do this, however. Instead they gathered once a year to murder a child, grind its body into powder, and mix this in a wine keg from which they drank. There are shades of conspiratorial witchcraft here, but they take the form of infanticide and gruesome baby-powder beverages, not home invasion after fertility celebration in the fields.

So poorly, in fact, does Bernardino’s story of the nighttime dance near Benevento reflect the standard forms of the general Abundia/Oriente/Holda mythic structure, and so incongruously does it mesh with his other discussions of witchcraft, that two experts on the friar’s writings about witches suggest that Bernardino lifted the story from an entirely different tradition: an English fairytale, that of Eadric Wild, lord of Lydbury North, which the Sienese Franciscan could have known through Walter Map’s wildly popular De n juicy curiaium, composed in the late twelfth century. According to Map, Eadric was traveling at night in the company of a pageboy when he came upon a drinking-house at the edge of a forest. Inside, a group of beautiful women were dancing. Filled with sudden lust for one of them, Eadric burst in and dragged her off, despite her resistance and that of the other women. He then had his way with her for three days, during which time she remained entirely silent. On the fourth day, she agreed to marry him, albeit with the injunction that if he should ever reproach her in a certain way, she would vanish. As is the nature of fairytales, this eventually happened. Here we have several elements of the Beneventian dance, although the lord rather than his page is the active figure, the dance takes place inside a building rather than in the open air, and the woman is silent for three days, not three years. But who knows what version of Map’s story, or other related stories, Bernardino may have heard. Just prior to the tale of Eadric in De n juicy curiaium, Map told of the Welshman Gwestin Gwestiniog who saw a group of women dancing for three nights in a field by a lake. On the fourth night he seized one of them, while the others vanished into the water. Such stories, as Franco Mormando points out, are a standard type with numerous variants.

Bernardino was not telling fairytales that Sunday in Siena, however; he was telling stories about witchcraft. Although he made no direct reference to witches in his account of the Beneventian dance itself, he assumed that his

22. Mormando, Preacher’s Demons, 69–70; Montesano, Supra acqua, 150.
25. Mormando, Preacher’s Demons, 70.
audience would understand that demonic witchcraft was somehow involved. Walter Map had also indicated that demonic evil was at work in the stories he told. Like any educated cleric in the Middle Ages, he maintained that the fairy women in his accounts were in fact demonic succubi.26 The girl in Bernardino’s story, however, was clearly human, a foreigner who had been cruelly taken away from her equally human parents and her distant but still terrestrial homeland of Schiavonia. Where might this have been, and what clues can it provide about the general framework of ideas that Bernardino might have hoped his audience would draw from the story, or within which he expected them to situate it?

As mentioned already, Schiavonia literally means the slave-land, and in that sense the term could encompass many regions. A substantial slave trade existed in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy, and a Sienese audience would have been familiar with foreign slaves brought from as far as the Caucasus or sub-Saharan Africa. For example, a Tuscan sonnet from this period features a female character who came from “Schiavonia” and who may have been either a Tartar or an African (experts disagree).27 Native Italians readily suspected such people of practicing maleficent sorcery, and stories of household slaves who plotted to magically harm or murder their masters circulated widely.28 While the girl at the Beneventian dance hailed from Schiavonia, however, she does not appear to have been a slave. Bernardino describes her forced separation from her father and mother as an injustice, but the implied villains of his account are witches, not slave traders. When naming her homeland, therefore, he probably meant the Slavic lands of the Balkans, where, conveniently for my speculations, there happens to have been a set of beliefs that connected nocturnal fertility rites and witchcraft.

Along the length of the eastern Adriatic coast, individuals known as kresniks mirrored the functions of their more famous cousins the benandanti almost exactly. Born with the caul, they would go out on certain nights in spirit form to battle evil opponents whom they, or at least the sources that recorded their accounts, typically described as witches. The earliest known reference

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26. Map, De nugis curialium, 158.
to *kresnìks* comes from a seventeenth-century Venetian report, which describes them meeting at crossroads to battle for agricultural fertility, particularly during the Ember Days, just as the *benandanti* did.\(^2^9\) One can assume such beliefs preexisted this source by some time. Intriguingly, the general mythology of the *kresnìks* also included indications of travel from Balkan to Italian lands. A modern report from the northern Adriatic region of Istria, for example, declares that the *kresnìks*’ witch opponents (*strigoni*) would sail over the sea to Venice in eggshells. There they would seek out young children and suck their blood. They would also, apparently, do some shopping in the Piazza San Marco, buying such goodies as candies, apples, and pears. The *kresnìks* would follow and fight to prevent them from doing any harm.\(^3^0\)

Here we have a set of beliefs that presents witches and other witch-like beings traveling from Schiavonia to Italy to engage in nocturnal fertility-related rites. Admittedly, the rites here were battles, not festive dancing, and the *kresnìks* (like the *benandanti* and others of their ilk across Europe) traveled in spirit form, whereas the page was able to lay quite physical hands on the Schiavonian girl at Benevento. An attractive feature to postulating that Bernardino had something like the *kresnik* belief structure in mind when he told his tale of the Beneventian dance, however, is that it might help explain why, although the Sienese friar clearly intended his account to serve as an indictment of witches, he gave no indication that he regarded the girl herself as a witch. Instead, he lamented that she had been stolen away from her parents, and that crime served as his immediate justification for enjoining his listeners in Siena to rise up and eradicate the witches who might be hiding in their midst.

The extremely brief nature of Bernardino’s story makes it impossible to ascertain with certainty what he really had in mind in making that leap from the tragedy of the girl torn from her parents to the need to kill all witches. A twenty-first-century reader, especially one familiar with modern allegations of Satanic ritual abuse, might imagine that the friar lamented the girl’s perhaps unwilling seduction into a sect of witches, which then required her to go at the devil’s command to Benevento to dance. This, however, runs counter to how late medieval clerical authorities most often regarded people whom they believed to be members of such sects. Allowing oneself to be seduced into a

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diabolical cult was a heinous sin in its own right, and many authorities condemned these people harshly, rather than pitying them in any way. An alternate conclusion that might explain Bernardino’s stated sympathy for the girl could therefore be that he regarded her not as a witch herself but as their victim, drawn away from her homeland by an obligation to participate in a rite either in conjunction with witches or perhaps against them. The inquisitors who encountered the benandanti, after all, were also initially confused by their beliefs and were willing to give some credence to their claims that they fought against witches, before eventually clamping down and insisting that the benandanti were witches themselves, at least according to Ginzburg’s analysis (challenged significantly by some subsequent scholarship).31

That our Schiavonian girl spent the night dancing rather than engaged in any kind of combat provides something of a wrinkle to this line of argument, but is not altogether problematic. The slippage from mythic notions of nocturnal battles to feasts and revels was relatively easy. Feasting figured in the belief structure of the benandanti, and other late medieval and early modern records supply numerous examples of people who believed that they went out at night, often on the Ember Days, not to do battle but to celebrate in the company of a “good society” that recalled or sometimes directly referenced the groups that followed Dame Abundia, Oriente, Holda, and the rest.32 This is not to say that the original mythic function of nocturnal travelers who feasted and brought fertility was the same as that of spirit hosts that clashed and battled, but such stories often blended together in later medieval accounts.33 As I have already mentioned, however, I do not actually think that Bernardino was much influenced by such general notions, although he certainly would have been aware of them.

Another problem with explaining the Beneventian dance in terms of the standard forms of “good society” folklore is that such festive gatherings, like the battles of the benandanti and kresnikes, were believed to occur in spirit. The girl whom the Roman page seized, however, had evidently been transported bodily from her distant homeland. Her physicality is another bizarre aspect of Bernardino’s story, because in other accounts of witchcraft he generally stressed how, in all matters of transformation or transportation, witches were deluded by demonic trickery. Regarding the witches of Rome, for example, he asserted that although they thought they could transform into

31. Especially Nardon, *Benandanti e inquisitori*.
cats, this was only an illusion. To support this point, he quoted the canon *Episcopi* and its similar assertion about women who believed that they traveled at night in the train of a pagan goddess but were in fact merely deluded by demonic illusions. He would thus appear to have undercut his own position by subsequently describing a physically real nocturnal gathering that he also meant to associate in some way with witches.

In the course of the fifteenth century, clerical authorities would challenge the ancient claim of the canon *Episcopi* that such nighttime transport was always illusory, and increasingly they would assert that witches’ sabbaths could be physically real. For example, in his infamous *Malleus maleficarum*, written in 1486, Heinrich Kramer claimed that a witch herself had testified that she sometimes attended sabbaths in the flesh and sometimes only in spirit. Nevertheless, Bernardino’s description of a material dance is curious enough to justify asking what precedents or models he may have had in mind, beyond visionary nocturnal societies. Here Ginzburg, the foremost proponent of ecstatic and shamanistic explanations for such beliefs, supplies a clue. In *Ecstasies*, he makes passing reference to real, physical battles that took place in the Alps of Graubünden in what is now southeastern Switzerland, documented in an early-sixteenth-century source. Groups of men known as *punchiadurs* would fight each other at ritualized times of the year to ensure a good wheat harvest. Surely some form of these rites existed a hundred years earlier in Bernardino’s time, just as they would endure in modified form for centuries thereafter. As Ginzburg notes, “along the entire Alpine arc seasonal ceremonies celebrated by groups of masked men have continued to this day.” The most famous examples enduring into modern times are the so-called *Perchtenlaufen* still prevalent in the Austrian regions of Salzburg and Tyrol, and extending even into Slovenian Carinthia. Related practices have been traced still deeper into the Balkans, as far as what is now Romania and Bulgaria, although perhaps still among primarily Germanic populations.

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Rooted in midwinter fertility rites, the *Perchtenlaufen* now feature only festive dancing, along with some occasional mock violence.\(^41\) Traces of more combative aspects to these rites can be found even in the modern period, however. While writing a charmingly Edwardian report on “The Perchten Dancers of Salzburg” in 1908, a Mrs. Herbert Vivian reported that “sometimes a group of Perchten from one village meet a band from another and warfare ensues. Indeed, on one occasion in past days, four Perchten were killed and stealthily buried by the rest.”\(^42\)

In addition to the folklore of illusory feasts and spirit battles, therefore, some physically real nocturnal rites might have informed Bernardino’s account of the Beneventian dance. If his reference to the girl’s Schiavonian homeland points across the Adriatic to the fertility rites of the *kresniks* or something like them, then the solidly material nature of the dance may point north to the Alps. Bernardino could easily have heard reports from this region. We know, for example, that his knowledge of the “people of the keg” in the western Alpine region of Piedmont came via other Franciscan friars who served there.\(^43\) Or the stories could have come south in a number of other ways. While in modern times Alpine Perchten have been played by men, there are indications that in earlier periods women readily participated in these rites.\(^44\) Or genders could have shifted in the retelling of tales and the blending of different folkloric and fairytale elements, for what we see in Bernardino’s few short lines of sermon is obviously a jumble of traditions combining folklore, myth, and learned demonology.

Focusing on physical fertility rites returns us to the physical location of the Beneventian dance, which took place on a threshing floor. Such specificity would seem to require some model or foundation. On the one hand, such a foundation is easy enough to postulate in a generic sense. Threshing floors...
have been regarded as ritual sites and have been loaded with special significance since antiquity. Many experts think the chorus floor of Greek theaters developed from threshing circles. Springing forward many millennia, modern neopagan witches often use the threshing floor as a symbol for ritualized, fertility-related space. On the other hand, however, while we have a few historical accounts of witches’ sabbaths taking place on threshing floors, they were not among the locations typically specified in late medieval or early modern sources as the sites of diabolical assemblies. Neither have I found any indication that historical Perchten or punctiadurs (or kresniks, for that matter) met to dance (or do battle) on threshing floors. Among modern forms of Perchtenlauf, however, there is a particular dance that is especially important for securing fertility and rich harvests. It is called the Trestern, a name reflecting the current German word for mash or pulp but most likely derived from older words meaning the threshing of grain, and experts suppose that its movements symbolize ritualistic stamping on a threshing floor.

Such pieces of information may tantalize, but they cannot definitively resolve the riddle posed by Bernardino’s cryptic account. In the end, we will never know with certainty what stories the Sienese friar had heard or what traditions he drew on as he constructed his sermon. He must have thought that the story he presented, brief as it was, would resonate with his audience and rouse them against the wickedness of witches, but in that regard he may actually have miscalculated. Whatever impressions his audience may or may not have taken away from this one sermon, overall Bernardino failed to spark any witch trials in Siena in 1427. The reason, one expert has convincingly argued, was that he presented too many new ideas about conspiratorial, diabolical witchcraft, rather than more traditional conceptions of harmful sorcery with which people were already familiar, and that he drew too many new connections. It is entirely possible, therefore, that his audience on that
long-ago Sunday was just as uncertain about what to make of the silent Schia-
vonian girl dancing on a threshing floor near Benevento as modern scholars
have been.

Nevertheless, enough evidence of possible connections exists to suggest
that Bernardino was alluding, in this brief bit of sermon, to various sets of
folkloric beliefs and practices related to fertility that he, although perhaps not
yet his audience, connected in some way to the wickedness of diabolical
witches. His sermon then itself becomes another small piece of evidence for
the interaction of such beliefs, better known from the early modern period,
with emerging notions of diabolical, conspiratorial witchcraft in the early
fifteenth century. And if I am right about connections north into the Alps as
well as east to the Balkans, this suggests that we should pay more attention to
real ritual practices among the rural peasantry, in addition to apparently
visionary experiences and their vast but problematic shamanistic undertones,
when attempting to decipher folkloric components of witchcraft and the
many tangled roots of the witches’ sabbath.