

David W Fletcher, Fall 1999

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GINZBURG'S *THE CHEESE AND THE WORMS*: A BRIEF REVIEW

Carlo Ginzburg, author of *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (1989), *The Enigma of Piero: Pierodella Francesca—the Baptism, the Arezzo Cycle, the Flagellation* (1988), and *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1983), is professor of history at the University of Bologna and the University of California, Los Angeles. In his work *The Cheese and the Worms*,¹ Ginzburg relates the story of a medieval miller of Friuli, Domenico Scandella, called Menocchio, who is put on trial for heresy during the Italian Inquisition. Ginzburg nicely recreates the experience of a medieval trial—something monotonous, seemingly endless, and without apparent utility—at least to moderns who generally suffer from a culture infused with impatient pragmatism. This relentless prodding of the inquisitors for answers to their hairsplitting questions, of Menocchio for meaning to his contemptible existence, and of Ginzburg for threads of connection between the trial proceedings and possible sources is laborious. Contemporary readers, except for specialists in cosmology, derivative theology, evolutionary anthropology, and late medieval history, likely will have little tolerance for such esoteric musings.

As stated, Menocchio, an obscure miller who is important nonetheless to his local village, is on trial by Inquisition authorities for heresies which are numerous, fluid, and conflicting.

¹Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, translated by John and Anne Tedeschi (1980; paperback edition, Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 177 pages with index.

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Ginzburg's main objective is to get at the sources for Menocchio's thinking, especially his bizarre cosmological view involving cheese and worms that are born in the cheese. Like a relentless detective, Ginzburg takes the reader into excursions, asides, and digressions. He explores written sources such as the Bible in the vernacular, the Koran, Sir John Mandeville's *Travels*, Dominican Albert da Castello's *Il Lucidario della Madonna*, and many others. He postulates an eclectic medieval oral tradition from which Menocchio might have gleaned his ideas. But all this chasing of sources makes the reader feel like the proverbial rat trapped in the maze. There are many variations of possibilities for escape, but there is no resolve. The discussion of oral versus written sources goes on and on. But one thing is certain. All oral tradition unless codified is unpredictable and not easily discernable. While a valid hypothesis concerning source material for Menocchio's religious ideas, oral tradition remains unverifiable. After all, *the written codification* of the oral tradition of Menocchio's trials is what Ginzburg found in the Archivio della Curia Arcivescovile of Udine, and this discovery sparked his writing *The Cheese and the Worms*. Also, Menocchio's suggestion that he is a *tabula rasa* who simply creates these things in his own mind seems incredulous. That Ginzburg would take this seriously is all the more unbelievable (unless Ginzburg is using this as a rhetorical tactic). Menocchio is not unaffected by his environment that includes written sources, as Ginzburg so ably points out.

With the question of the origin of Menocchio's ideas about origins aside, what is left to discuss? A *Religionsgeschichtlich* approach falls quick prey to quaint anthropological inquiries. This is what Ginzburg offers and little more. Perhaps more development of the Church hierarchy

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and the consternation of the peasant against his elite accusers by way of a sociological reading of religion in sixteenth century Italy would prove useful. But Ginzburg does little to develop this. His real concern is prodding the interaction of inquisitor, miller, and Menocchio's acquaintances in order to find out about "Cheese." When this is attributed to an ancient Indian myth in the Vedas, derived from residual medieval oral tradition, Ginzburg's work is done. No more is left to ascertain from Menocchio. There is no complete characterization of Menocchio—his family, his work, his accomplishments as mayor, his business dealings. These things are not explored, but these are what would make Menocchio come alive and would give contextual meaning to his religious ideas. Why Ginzburg does not broaden his research is unclear, but the failure to do so leaves Menocchio as a religious oddity, a heretic without significance, another faceless victim of an oppressive religious hierarchy. Perhaps Ginzburg is unable to draw a more complete likeness of Menocchio from the trial proceedings.

Although the specialist might prefer to study the complete text of these trials, as exegete of Menocchio's hearings, Ginzburg is superb. As phenomenologist on this Friulian miller's religious thought, Ginzburg is without peer. But *The Cheese and the Worms* hardly can be dubbed a serious *Quellenforschung* or *traditionsgeschichte* except for a very narrow slice of sixteenth-century Italian history. Michael Hunter notes, "Few will be able to accept Ginzburg's general thesis, his argument that Menocchio gives expression to a lively and homogeneous peasant culture" (*History* 1981 66:296). Bennett Hill suggests, "The general reader will find the style opaque and the results unexciting. [The book is] for research libraries" (*Library Journal*

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1980 105:1512). Menocchio at best provides an illustration of “the ingenuity and determination of the human spirit in face of adverse circumstance” (see J. H. Elliott, *The New York Review of Books* 1980 27:38). At worst, Menocchio is just another heretic who follows a typical pattern with nothing exceptional, so Ginzburg (p. 112). To adapt an old cliché, when you’ve seen one heretic, you’ve seen them all.