

experience could not be successfully conveyed, and the statements about the departure of the soul from the body were condemned. The confessions of the witches and benandanti were wilfully incorporated into the inquisitorial *schema* with its contrary concepts of a real tangible sabbat and one of fantasy and imagination.

13

What we have noted thus far helps to explain the reason for the queries attempted by Fra Felice da Montefalco during the interrogation. It is not surprising either, that in the final session the notary observed that Gasparutto's wife cried without shedding tears, a fact considered obvious evidence of witchcraft and of ties to the devil;⁶² and that Gasparutto's and Moduco's trial was routinely filed under the rubric *'Processus haeresis contra quosdam strigones'* ('heresy trial against certain witches').

When we turn, however, to the rites which, according to the benandanti, were practised at their nocturnal gatherings, it is clear that they bore no resemblance to the sabbat. They were rites that hardly need to be explained, so explicit and transparent is their significance: we are not dealing with hardened superstitions mechanically repeated, but with ceremonies that were intensely and emotionally experienced.⁶³ The benandanti, armed with bundles of fennel who fought witches and warlocks armed with stalks of sorghum, did so with the consciousness that they were locked in a struggle 'out of love for the crops', to assure their community abundant harvests, a plenitude of food, of small grains, and of the vineyards, in fact, 'all the fruits of the earth'. It was an agricultural rite which survived with extraordinary vitality almost to the end of the sixteenth century in the marginal area of the Friuli, left relatively untouched by the main routes of communication.⁶⁴ It is hard to say when it originated, but even today, it is possible to discern the complexity of the cult which expressed itself through this rite.

The benandanti went forth on Thursday nights in the Ember seasons: festivities which had survived from an ancient agricultural cycle and which were eventually incorporated in the Christian calendar,⁶⁵ that symbolized the changes of the seasons, the perilous passage from the old to the new time of year, with its promise of planting, harvest, reaping and autumn vintage.⁶⁶ It was during these occasions,

on which the prosperity of the community depended, that the benandanti went forth to protect the produce of the earth from witches and warlocks, and from those forces that they thought secretly threatened the fertility of the fields: 'And if we are the victors, that year there is abundance, but if we lose there is famine.'

To be sure, the benandanti were not alone in fulfilling this propitiatory function. The church itself laboured to protect the harvests and ward off those all too frequent and ruinous famines by means of Rogations, processions around the fields, usually during the three days preceding the Ascension: and for a long time the tradition was preserved of forecasting harvests from each of these days – the first for vegetables and grapes, the second for wheat, and the third for hay.⁶⁷ And, in this period, the disasters caused by foul weather were frequently attributed, especially in the Friuli, to punishment inflicted by God for past sins: on 9 April 1596 Clement VIII absolved the district of Polcenico from an excommunication which it feared it had incurred as evidenced by the barrenness of the crops; he did the same on 26 March 1598 with the district of San Daniele, whose harvests had been repeatedly struck by hail.⁶⁸ But if the processions of the Rogation Days and papal absolutions were not considered sufficient, here, in tacit competition, emerged the rites of appeasement of the benandanti. It certainly was not accidental that the benandanti's weapon in their battles to protect the fertility of the fields was, as Gasparutto described it, the wayfaring tree or viburnum, 'that rod which we carry behind the crosses in the Rogation processions.' This mixture of the sacred and the diabolical led the inquisitor to forbid Gasparutto (and the prohibition was intended to include his domestics) from bearing these rods in the Rogation processions, and in fact to order them kept at home.⁶⁹

Obviously, we are not suggesting by this that Friulian peasants at the end of the sixteenth century attempted to safeguard their crops and their harvests exclusively by means of religious processions or superstitious practices, but the careful performance of work in the fields could and in fact did easily co-exist with faith in the benefits of ecclesiastical rituals or even in nocturnal battles fought victoriously by the benandanti. In these very years and among these same peasants there is evidence of attitudes that were deeply and fiercely naturalistic; such as a magnificent statement by Niccolò Pellizzaro, a peasant of Villa in Carnia, whom the Inquisition condemned in 1595 for having maintained 'that the benedictions which priests pronounce over fields, and the holy water which they sprinkle over them the day of Epiphany, in no way help the vines and trees to bear fruit; only dung and the industry of man do that.'⁷⁰ But even more than a 'humanistic'

exaltation of man's power over nature, we may see here the echo of a religious polemic; Pellizzaro, in fact, was suspected of Lutheranism, and by his statement he may have been conveying his scorn for priests and Catholic ceremonies.

So the benandanti with fennel stalks battled witches armed with stalks of sorghum. It is not clear why sorghum was the weapon of the witches – unless it could be identified with the broom, their traditional symbol (the so-called 'broom sorghum', one of the most common varieties of sorghum, is a type of millet). It is a compelling theory, especially in light of what we will say about the nocturnal gatherings of the witches and benandanti as the antecedents of the diabolical sabbat – but obviously this is a theory which should be advanced with caution. In any case, for the benandanti the sorghum seemed to symbolize the evil power of the witches. The parish priest of Brazzano, Bartolomeo Sgabarizza, reported having had this conversation with Gasparutto: 'He begged me not to sow sorghum in my field, and whenever he finds any growing he pulls it up, and he curses whoever plants it; and when I said that I wanted to sow it, he began to swear.'⁷¹ To fennel, instead, whose healing qualities were recognized in popular medicine, was attributed the power of keeping witches away: Moduco affirmed that the benandanti ate garlic and fennel 'because they are a defence against witches'.⁷²

It may be supposed that this combat re-enacted, and to a certain extent rationalized, an older fertility rite in which two groups of youths,⁷³ respectively impersonating demons favourable to fertility and the maleficent ones of destruction, symbolically flayed their loins with stalks of fennel and sorghum to stimulate their own reproductive capacity, and by analogy, the fertility of the fields of the community.⁷⁴ Gradually the rite may have come to be represented as an actual combat, and from the uncertain outcome of the struggle between the two opposed bands would magically depend the fertility of the land and the fate of the harvests.⁷⁵ At a later stage these rites would cease to be practised openly and would exist precariously, between the dream-like and the hallucinatory, in any case on a purely internal emotional plane – and yet without quite sliding into mere individual fantasizing.

But these are pure conjectures that can be confirmed only on the basis of solid evidence, unavailable at present, about preceding phases of the cult. There is absolutely nothing in the statements of the benandanti that can be interpreted as a relic of this hypothetical original rite. More plausible perhaps is the analogy between the battles of benandanti against witches and ritual contests between

Winter and Summer (or Winter and Spring) which used to be acted out, and still are today, in some areas of north-central Europe.⁷⁶ Consider, for example, the plant parts with which both contestants are draped: Winter with pine branches or other plants of the season, Summer with ears of grain, flowers, and so forth. Is there something analogous, even though the two plants flourish in the same season, in the sorghum and the fennel of which the benandanti spoke? It should be noted, in particular, that the contest between Winter and Summer is linked, in some areas, to a presumably older rite, that of the expulsion of Death, or of the Witch.⁷⁷ In this ceremony, undoubtedly intended to procure abundant harvests, an effigy of Death, or of the Witch, is beaten with a stick, stoned, and finally solemnly driven from the village. Is there an analogy between this symbolical removal of the wintry season, and the blows inflicted on the witches by the benandanti? Possibly; but along with these similarities there are also notable differences. First of all, the ritual struggle between Winter and Summer was celebrated everywhere once a year, whereas the benandanti claimed that they fought the witches on four occasions each year (the Ember seasons); secondly, and this is even more important, the content of the two rites appears to be totally dissimilar. In the contests between Winter and Summer a peaceful alternation of the seasons is symbolized, and the victory of Summer is inevitable;⁷⁸ on the contrary, the battles between benandanti and witches were a clash, with an uncertain outcome, between abundance and famine, a real battle conducted according to a precise ritual. Here the contrast between old and new seasons was experienced dramatically, virtually a contest to decide the actual physical survival of the community.⁷⁹

14

In the confessions of these benandanti, religious elements of very different origin were superimposed on this agrarian rite, seemingly self-sufficient in its internal motivations. Moduco and Gasparutto both asserted that they could not discuss the nocturnal conventicles in which they participated because by doing so they would be flouting the will of God; and Moduco clarified this point: 'We go forth in the service of Christ and the witches in the service of the devil.' The company of the benandanti was a divine entity, virtually a peasant army of the faith established by God ('we believe that it is given by God,

because we fight for the faith of Christ'): at its head, according to Gasparutto, was an angel of God; within the group, Moduco related, God and the saints were piously invoked, and its members were certain to go to paradise after death.

The contrast between fighting 'for love of the crops' and fighting 'for the faith of Christ' is indeed glaring. To be sure, in this popular religiosity, so composite, interlaced with the most varied elements, such syncretism is not surprising. But we should ask ourselves the reason for this Christianization of agrarian rites performed by the *benandanti* – which undoubtedly was 'spontaneous' in this period and widespread throughout the Friuli. Perhaps it was a method adopted in a distant past to shield from the eyes of the church a rite that was not quite orthodox (just as the groups of young people celebrating ancient fertility rites placed themselves under the protection of a patron saint);⁸⁰ or it may be that the ancient agrarian rite gradually received a Christian motif from those who ingenuously joined the good cause of the fertility of the fields with the holy cause of the faith of Christ. Finally, we may even suppose that, in the face of the progressive assimilation (to be discussed below) of diabolical elements on the part of their enemies, the witches, the *benandanti* instinctively and correspondingly identified their cause with that of the faith.

There may be some truth in each of these assumptions. At any rate, it is clear that this attempt at Christianization did not (and could not) succeed, and indeed was not favourably received by the Inquisition. It faded away within a few decades. Two primary elements coexisted within the medley of beliefs of which the *benandanti* were the bearers: an agrarian cult (probably the more ancient of the two) and a Christian cult, and in addition a number of other elements capable of being assimilated by witchcraft. When inquisitors failed to understand the first and decisively rejected the second, this composite of myths and beliefs, for lack of other outlets, inevitably had to debouch in the last direction.

Thus far we have spoken principally of the *benandanti*. The time has come to talk about their adversaries: the witches and warlocks. They appear from the confessions of Gasparutto and Moduco first of all by

way of contrast – a contrast that here too is physical and tangible – with the *benandanti*: 'Our captain was somewhat pale of face, and the other one swarthy,' 'our standard bearer carries a banner of white silk, gilded, with a lion . . . the banner of the witches is of red silk with four black devils, gilded.'⁸¹ But what did witches and warlocks do in their conventicles? Besides fighting with the *benandanti*, 'they dance and leap about,' Gasparutto stated. There is no trace, as we have already noted, of the elements that would later impress a diabolical stigma on the traditional sabbat: presence of the devil, profanation of the sacraments and apostasy from the faith. To be sure, certain details were there pointing to a tendency in this direction – the devils depicted on the banner of the witches and Moduco's statement: 'We go forth in the service of Christ and the witches in the service of the devil.' But these are isolated matters, and may have been appropriated at a later date. These witches were characterized not in terms of crimes theologically defined, but rather in terms of the destruction they brought to the harvests and famine, and the sorcery they worked on children. But even in this second instance they had to overcome the strenuous opposition of the *benandanti*. The son of the miller Pietro Rotaro 'had been possessed by witches, but . . . at the time of the witchery the vagabonds were about and they snatched him from the witches' hands.' In fact, the *benandanti* could recognize immediately the victim of an act of witchcraft: 'It can be ascertained,' said Gasparutto, 'because they do not leave any flesh on the body, . . . and they remain dried up and withered, nothing but skin and bones.' If the *benandanti* arrived in time they could attempt to save the bewitched child: it sufficed to weigh him three successive Thursdays, and 'while the child is weighed on the scale, the captain of the *benandanti* uses the scale to torment the witch that has caused the injury, even to the point of killing him; . . . when the child gains in weight . . . the witch withers and dies, and if the child withers, it is the witch that lives.'⁸²

The fact that this trial is the first Friulian evidence of witches' conventicles might be considered pure chance. But this coincidence becomes remarkable and probably no longer casual when we notice that it is not until 1634 (and after more than 850 trials and denunciations to the Holy Office of Aquileia and Concordia) before we encounter a full description of the traditional diabolical sabbat. There are many accounts before this time of nocturnal conventicles of witches and warlocks, but *benandanti* were always present in them, and the rites were always somewhat unusual, much like those described by Gasparutto and Moduco. It is a relationship that recurs too often and over too long a period to be attributed to chance.

Something must have taken place in the Friuli akin to what has been documented for another part of the peninsula, the area around Modena:⁸³ the gradual but continuous transformation of ancient popular beliefs, which, under the unconscious pressure from inquisitors, finally crystallized in the pre-existing mould of the diabolical sabbat. In Modena, the earliest references to nocturnal meetings of witches in fact do not concern the adoration of the devil, but the cult, still innocuously magical, of a mysterious female divinity, Diana, about which we have knowledge in northern Italy at least from the end of the fourteenth century.⁸⁴ When it was said of a witch (who was mentioned in a trial in 1498, although she herself was not tried) that she used to go 'in striacium', that is to say, to the sabbat, what is described is merely a peaceful nocturnal gathering of individuals assembled together until dawn to eat 'the turnips of a field or garden'.⁸⁵ It is not until 1532 that one encounters descriptions of the desecration of the cross and of the host, intercourse with devils, and so forth. And it should be noted that in this later context the person of Diana, although transformed, was still present.⁸⁶

We see that the acceptance of the diabolical sabbat in the Modenese area long preceded – by a century in fact – a similar development in the Friuli. This too reflects what we have called 'the marginal quality' of the Friuli, as well as, perhaps, the greater complexity and vitality of the benandanti's beliefs compared to the cult of Diana (a cult from which these beliefs were an offshoot). In both cases, however, it seems fair to assert that the belief in the diabolical sabbat is something that was initially foreign to the popular mind. Indeed, even if this observation could be applied to many other localities, the problem of the origins of the diabolical sabbat would still persist.⁸⁷

The trial of Gasparutto and Moduco was the first in a long series involving the benandanti (both men and women) who declared that they fought at night with witches and warlocks to secure the fertility of the fields and the abundance of the harvests. This belief (we have hinted at its presumably ritual origins) does not appear to the best of our knowledge, in any of the countless trials for witchcraft or superstitious practices held outside the Friuli. The sole and extraordinary exception is furnished by the trial of a Livonian werewolf which took

place at Jürgensburg in 1692 – more than a century after the trial of Gasparutto and Moduco, and at the other extremity of Europe.⁸⁸

The accused, a certain Thiess, an old man in his eighties, freely confessed to his judges that he was a werewolf (*wahrwolff*). But his account seriously differs from the concept of lycanthropy which was widespread in northern Germany and the Baltic countries. Thiess related that he once had his nose broken by a peasant of Lemburg named Skeistan, who at that time was already dead. Skeistan was a witch, and with his companions had carried seed grain into hell to keep the crops from growing. With other werewolves Thiess had also gone down into hell and had fought with Skeistan. The latter, armed with a broom handle (again, the traditional symbol of witches) wrapped in the tail of a horse had struck the old man on the nose. This was not a casual encounter. Three times each year on the nights of St Lucia before Christmas, of Pentecost, and of St John, the werewolves proceeded on foot, in the form of wolves, to a place located 'beyond the sea': hell. There they battled the devil and witches, striking them with long iron rods, and pursuing them like dogs. Werewolves, Thiess exclaimed, 'cannot tolerate the devil'. The judges, undoubtedly astonished, asked for elucidation. If werewolves could not abide the devil, why did they change themselves into wolves and go down into hell? Because, old Thiess explained, by doing so they could bring back up to earth what had been stolen by the witches – livestock, grains, and the other fruits of the earth. If they failed to do so, precisely what had occurred the previous year would be repeated: the werewolves had delayed their descent into hell, found the gates barred and thus failed to bring back the grains and buds carried off by the witches. For this reason last year's harvest had been very bad. But this year, instead, things had been different, and, thanks to the werewolves, the harvest of barley and rye, as well as a rich catch of fish, were assured.

At this point the judges asked where the werewolves went after death. Thiess replied that they were buried like other people, but that their souls went to heaven; as for the souls of witches, the devil claimed them for himself. The judges were visibly shaken. How was it possible, they asked, for the souls of werewolves to ascend to God if it was not God they served but the devil? The old man emphatically rejected this notion: the werewolves were anything but servants of the devil. The devil was their enemy to the point that they, just like dogs – because werewolves were indeed the hounds of God – pursued him, tracked him down, and scourged him with whips of iron. They did all this for the sake of mankind: without their good work the devil would carry off the fruits of the earth and everyone would be deprived as a

consequence. The Livonian werewolves were not alone in their fight with the devil over the harvests: German werewolves did so as well, although they did not belong to the Livonian company and they journeyed to their own particular hell; and the same also was true of Russian werewolves who that year and the one before had won prosperous and abundant harvests for their land. As soon as the werewolves managed to snatch away from the devil the seed grain he had stolen, they cast it up into the air so that it might fall back down to earth and be spread over the fields of rich and poor alike.

At this juncture, as might have been foreseen, the judges tried to get Thiess to confess that he had entered into a compact with the devil. The old man reiterated, in vain, with monotonous obstinacy that he and his companions were 'the hounds of God' and the enemies of the devil, that they protected men from dangers and guaranteed the prosperity of harvests. Then the parish priest was summoned, who scolded him and called on him to abandon the errors and diabolical lies with which he had tried to cover up his sins. But this too was useless. In a burst of anger Thiess shouted at the priest that he was tired of hearing all this talk about his evil doings: his actions were better than the priest's, and moreover he, Thiess, would neither be the first nor the last to commit them. The old man remained steadfast in his convictions and refused to repent; on 10 October 1692 he was condemned to ten lashes for his superstitious beliefs and acts of idolatry.

This was not a case, clearly, of more or less ill-defined similarities, or of the repetition of metahistorical religious archetypes.⁸⁹ The beliefs of the old werewolf Thiess substantially resemble those which emerged at the trial of the two Friulian benandanti: battles waged by means of sticks and blows, enacted on certain nights to secure the fertility of fields, minutely and concretely described. Even details such as the broom handles with which the Livonian witches were armed recalls the stalks of sorghum or millet used by the witches of the Friuli. In the Friuli the struggle was primarily over the vineyards, in Livonia over barley and rye, but the struggle for fertility was understood as a work that was not merely tolerated but was even protected by God, who actually guaranteed entrance into paradise for the souls of the participants. There is not much doubt about any of this. Obviously, what we have here is a single agrarian cult, which, to judge from these remnants surviving in places as distant from one another as were Livonia and the Friuli, must have been diffused in an earlier period over a much vaster area, perhaps the whole of central Europe. On the other hand, these survivals may be explained either by the peripheral positions of the Friuli and Livonia with respect to the centre of diffu-

sion of these beliefs, or by the influence, in both cases, of Slavic myths and traditions. The fact that in Germanic areas, as we shall see, there were faint traces of the myth of nocturnal combats waged over fertility, might lead us to lean towards the second possibility. Only intensive research may be able to resolve this problem.

But it is not just the beliefs of old Thiess that remind us of the Friulian benandanti. The reaction of the Jürgensburg judges resembles, even in particulars, that of the Udine inquisitors: both rejected, with mingled shock and indignation, the paradoxical boasts of the benandanti to be the champions of 'Christ's faith', and of the werewolves to be 'the hounds of God'. In both cases the judges tried to identify the benandanti and the werewolves with the witches who were followers and worshippers of the devil. There is a difference to be noted, however. Gasparutto and Moduco, to the best of our knowledge, were the first benandanti tried by the Holy Office; the very name 'benandanti' was unknown to the inquisitors. Only gradually would the benandanti assume the traits of diabolical witches. In that late seventeenth-century Livonian trial we are witnessing the opposite phenomenon. The figure and negative attributes of werewolves, the ferocious scourge of flocks and herds, were well known to the judges of Jürgensburg. But a totally different picture was painted by old Thiess: werewolves were defenders of the harvest and of livestock against the constant threat from the enemies of the prosperity of mankind and of the fertility of the land – the devil and the witches. This revival of presumably ancient beliefs can probably be explained by the fact that at the end of the seventeenth century Livonian judges had ceased to use judicial torture or even rely on leading questions in the interrogation of defendants.⁹⁰ That the favourable image of werewolves was much older than the end of the seventeenth century is shown first of all by Thiess's venerable age: presumably he must have acquired these beliefs in his distant youth, which brings us to the early years of the century. But there is an even more compelling bit of evidence. In mid-sixteenth century Caspar Peucer, during a digression on werewolves and their extraordinary exploits, inserted into his *Commentarius de praecipuis generibus divinationum* an anecdote about a young man of Riga who had suddenly fallen prostrate to the ground during a banquet. One of the onlookers had immediately recognized him as a werewolf. The next day the youth related that he had fought a witch who had been flying about in the guise of a red-hot butterfly. Werewolves, in fact, Peucer commented, boasted that they kept witches away.⁹¹ This *was* an ancient belief, then. But, just as with the benandanti in the Friuli, under pressure from the judges, the original

positive qualities of the werewolves began gradually to fade away and become corrupted into the execrable image of the man-wolf, ravager of livestock.

In any case, on the basis of this surprising Livonian counterpart, it seems appropriate to suggest that there is a real, not an analogical, connection between benandanti and shamans. Such phenomena as trances, journeys into the beyond astride animals or in the form of animals (wolves or, as in the Friuli, butterflies and mice) to recover seed grain or to assure the fertility of the land, and as we will note shortly, participation in processions for the dead (which procured prophetic and visionary powers for the benandanti) form a coherent pattern which immediately evokes the rites of the shamans. But to trace the threads which tied these beliefs to the Baltic or Slavic world obviously falls outside the scope of this particular investigation. So let us return to the Friuli.

III THE BENANDANTI BETWEEN INQUISITORS AND WITCHES

1

Between 1575–80 and 1620, roughly, the myth of the 'agrarian' benandanti was recorded, with the basic characteristics that we have noted, throughout the Friuli. Only superficially was it a static phase in the events that we are describing, actually paving the way for a subsequent period of swift, almost violent change.

In the early months of 1583 the Holy Office at Udine received a denunciation against Toffolo di Buri, a 'herdsman' of Pieris, a village near Monfalcone – across the Isonzo river and thus outside the natural borders of the Friuli, although still under the spiritual jurisdiction of the diocese of Aquileia. This Toffolo 'asserts that he is a benandante, and that for a period of about twenty-eight years he has been compelled to go on the Ember Days in the company of other benandanti to fight witches and warlocks in spirit (leaving his body behind in bed) but dressed in the same clothing he is accustomed to wear during the day.' So Toffolo went to the conventicles 'in spirit', and for him too the act of 'going forth' was like dying: 'When he has to go out to fight he falls into a very deep sleep, and lying there on his back when the spirit leaves him three groans are heard, as people who are dying sometimes make.' The spirit went forth at midnight, and 'stays out of the body for three hours between going, fighting and returning home'; and if he did not set out punctually Toffolo was severely beaten. 'These benandanti, witches and warlocks who number about three thousand and even more, come from Capo d'Istria, Muggia, Trieste and the territory about Monfalcone, and other places of the Carso.' The benandanti ('some on foot and others on horseback') were armed with 'stalks of fennel',¹ while the warlocks 'use as weapons the slabs of wood for scouring the ovens before bread is baked; as for the witches, they use slimy canes, and some of them ride cocks, others cats, or dogs

and billy-goats,' and 'when they fight they administer great blows to the benandanti with these canes.' Here too the benandanti were drawn up in military formation: 'It is like seeing an army, because there is a drummer-boy, a bugler, and captains.' The bugler was from Trieste, the drummer from Capodistria: as for the captain, Toffolo, (who was the standard-bearer for the benandanti) 'he does not want to say what place he is from, because he is afraid he would be beaten if he did.' Once again, the battles were over the fertility of the fields: 'The benandanti had been victorious three Ember seasons, and . . . if they should prevail also during the Ember Days of Lent, witches and warlocks would have to tip their caps to them,' since, 'when the benandanti are victorious, that year there is abundance, and when their enemies win, storms prevail, and so there is a famine that year.'² Moreover, benandanti fought witches 'who with the devil's own cunning eat the flesh of little children,' making them die slowly, 'leaving them only skin and bone'. So once, when Toffolo spotted a woman 'who had lit a fire to burn a little creature born only a short time before,' he had yelled: ' "Oh, what are you doing?"' and then she let the creature go, transformed herself into a cat and ran off.'³

Thus far there is absolute agreement with the facts obtained from the confessions of the Cividale benandanti. But a popular myth that was not tied to a particular cultural tradition and therefore was uninfluenced by factors tending towards unification and homogeneity (a role which sermons, printed books, and theatrical representations sometimes played in this period) inevitably ended up attracting to itself individual and local accretions of every sort, eloquent testimony of its currency and vitality. There is a variant of this in the denunciation against Toffolo. He had asserted that 'even Turks, Jews and Heretics in infinite numbers have military exercises and fight as armies do, but separated from the sects named above,' by which he meant benandanti, witches and warlocks. This is indeed an extraordinary notion which may have existed elsewhere in the territory of Monfalcone, but this is the only trace of it that has come to our attention. In any case, it demonstrates that the benandanti too suspected their gatherings of being heterodox if they compared them to the jousts of Turks, Jews and heretics. And this awareness could cause them anguish of the kind to which Toffolo admitted (and which reminds us of the desperation of the unknown woman of Pasiano who had tearfully begged Aquilina, the sorceress of Udine, to free her from the necessity 'of seeing the dead'): 'He desires greatly to rid himself of his duty as standard bearer . . . and he says that he would consider himself happy if he could be so freed.' Why did Toffolo want this? He realized that his activities as a

benandante were contrary to the teachings of the Church, and this troubled him: 'He goes to confession and takes communion, and he believes what the Holy Roman Church believes, but he cannot help going out as was mentioned before; and it seems to me,' continued the anonymous author of the denunciation, 'that he said something about a caul in which some people are born.'⁴

On 18 March the members of the Holy Office of Udine met to decide about Toffolo. The same day they wrote to Antonio Zorzi, mayor of Monfalcone, requesting him to arrest the benandante and have him brought to Udine, 'so that we may have his testimony and thereby judge what should be done in this case.'⁵ The arrest took place (as the mayor of Monfalcone communicated by letter on 20 March) but as for sending the prisoner to Udine, that was not so simple: he did not have men to escort him there. But in Udine no one stirred. And after waiting in vain for either the Holy Office or the patriarch to send the necessary guards to Monfalcone, the mayor let the prisoner go.⁶ Toffolo's case was forgotten. Three years later (November 1586) the old denunciation surfaced in the archives of the Holy Office, prompting the inquisitor of Aquileia to visit Monfalcone and look into the matter. But Toffolo did not respond to the summons enjoining him to present himself to answer charges which rendered him 'suspect . . . in the faith'. A notary of the Inquisition was sent to Pieris where he learned that the benandante had left the village more than a year before, and no one knew his whereabouts.⁷

Once again the basic indifference of the inquisitors is obvious from the way these investigations were lazily protracted over the years. And it is symptomatic that in the span of almost a half-century (1575–1619), no trial against a benandante was brought to a conclusion, with the exception of the first one known to us, the trial in which Gasparutto and Moduco were condemned. In other cases which were obviously deemed more urgent – the repression of Lutheranism, for example – the activity of the Holy Office of Aquileia was extremely effective.

Then too, the traditional vigilance which Venice exercised over the Holy Office must have been applied with special care in matters as controversial as superstitious practices. The Venetian attitude is summed up in a message sent in 1609 by magistrates of the Republic to their officials in Udine, exhorting them to oppose the pretensions of inquisitors 'who are always attempting . . . to stretch the just limits of things and extend their jurisdiction.'⁸ In fact, lamented Paolo Bisanzio, the patriarch's vicar, in a letter to his superior dated December 1582, inquisitors were always seeking to enlarge their field of competence

even to the point of prosecuting 'certain poor women who, under the pretext of healing and being paid a little money for it, were using some superstitious practices that had nothing to do with heresy.' He asked for instructions on how to proceed since for his part he firmly believed that 'the inquisitor should not meddle with superstitions which have nothing to do with manifest heresy.'⁹ In point of fact, these power struggles must have helped to shield the benandanti from persecution by the Holy Office, among other reasons because inquisitors felt constrained to discover heretical propositions in the confessions of the benandanti (as we have seen from the sentences against Gasparutto and Moduco), not an easy matter, despite the pressure and twisting of meaning in the interrogations.

The insistence and cajoling on the part of inquisitors during the trials, which we have emphasized on several occasions, do not conflict with their basic lack of commitment in prosecuting and condemning benandanti. Once they gave up the attempt to force the confessions of the benandanti into the schemes and categories of the demonology treatises, the judges adopted an attitude of indifference. This is confirmed by the fact that when, towards the second decade of the seventeenth century, the benandanti began to assume the known, codified characteristics of sabbat-attending witches, the mood of the judges also changed, becoming harsher (if only relatively) and several trials actually concluded with mild condemnations.¹⁰

This judicial indifference seems to filter through in letters from the vicar Paolo Bisanzio to the patriarch, residing in Venice, bringing him up to date on the situation in the Friuli. On 4 July 1580 – the interrogations of Gasparutto and Moduco had occurred only recently – he wrote that four individuals had been discovered (only two, really) who made 'professions of being benandanti'. He gave assurance that 'they would be prosecuted to the full extent of the law so as to give a permanent lesson to the many others who exist and lie hidden in this land.' This show of diligence was negated a couple of months later by Bisanzio's own off-hand reference to 'two minor trials against benandanti and witches', as well as by the gentle punishment, which was anything but exemplary and immediately commuted, that was imposed on the two benandanti of Cividale.¹¹ A year or two later, on 12 February 1582, Bisanzio wrote to the patriarch in the same tone: 'A few days ago when I went to Gemona . . . a woman who speaks to the dead and is held in very low repute was denounced to me and we shall not fail to bring her to trial,' speaking of the benandante Anna la Rossa. 'We shall see,' he continued with good-natured sarcasm, 'whether she is a new Pythoness who can summon Samuel to the presence of Saul

. . .'¹² It does not surprise us that the questioning of the 'new Pythoness', after delays, postponements and solemn but ineffectual threats of excommunication, should have terminated with the recognition of the scant importance of the case, which was left to the inquisitor to conclude at some appropriate moment, in other words, never. What was lacking, after all, between benandanti and inquisitors was some mutual meeting ground, even if based only on hostility and repression. The benandanti were ignored as long as possible. Their 'fantasies' remained enclosed within a world of material and emotional needs which inquisitors neither understood, nor even tried to understand.