

'CARNJ PER LU CARNIVALJ'

STANLEY FIORINI

It is generally accepted that carnival was introduced into the Maltese Islands by the Knights of St. John.⁽¹⁾ This myth is perhaps rooted both in the relative scarcity of Maltese medieval documentation as well as in a misinterpretation of the writings of Giacomo Bosio, the Order's sixteenth century chronicler. Bosio asserts that in the year 1535 at Birgu, masked carnival revellers were joined by knights who held jousts with lances and rapiers. This secular involvement on the part of members of a religious order was deemed unbecoming by Grandmaster del Ponte who, therefore, held a general assembly in St. Lawrence's church to censure these *abusi, pazzie e leggierezze*.⁽²⁾ Yet, nowhere is it asserted that those carnival celebrations were the first to be held in Malta. In fact it is hardly surprising to learn otherwise in view of the increasingly tight contacts Malta had had with Europe, where carnival enjoyed a centuries' old tradition.⁽³⁾

The object of this note is to collect what evidence can be gleaned from Maltese late medieval documentation in support of the claim that carnival was celebrated in Malta long before the Order's arrival. The sources tapped are principally twofold: the records of accounts of Santo Spirito Hospital, Rabat: 1494 - 1562,⁽⁴⁾ and the minutes of the town-council: 1450 - 1498.⁽⁵⁾

The earliest extant books of accounts from Santo Spirito clearly state that carnival was one of the feasts celebrated in the hospital calendar, at par with Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, the titular feast of the institution. As happened on the latter solemn occasions, the inmates were regaled at Carnival with a meal of meat and wine, a welcome interruption from the drab daily fare of bread, oil or suet, and beans.⁽⁶⁾ Later records of the hospital, which are more generous in detail, betray the fact that Carnival was not just a one-day affair but that it certainly lasted three days and probably much longer. The following extract from the 1520 records is worth reproducing here:⁽⁷⁾

1. J. Cassar Pullicino, *Studies in Maltese Folklore*, (Malta, 1976), 21-26.
2. G. Bosio, *Dell'Istoria della Sacra Religione et Illustrissima Militia di San Giovanni Gierosolimitano*, Parte Terza, (Napoli, 1684), 140.
3. V. Gleijeses, *Piccola Storia Del Carnevale* (Napoli, 1971).
4. Museum of the Cathedral Mdina (MCM), Archives of the Cathedral Mdina (ACM) [Miscellanea] 438 N.1 (1494-96), Misc. 438 N.2 (1518-20), Misc. 438 N.4 (1554-55), Misc. 440 Pt.I (1540-44)ff. 1-25, Pt.II (1544-46) ff.26-37, Pt.III (1546-48) ff.38-51, Pts.IV-VI (1560-62) ff. 52-155^v.
5. National Library of Malta (NLM), Univ(ersità) 11 (1450-1498), Univ. 13 (1467-69) ff. 2-37^v.
6. MCM, ACM Misc. 438 N.1 (1494-96) *passim*.
7. *Ibid.* Misc. 438 N.2 (1520) ff. 16-16^v.

<i>Die xxx Januarij per carnj per lj habitantj per lo principio di Carnivalj</i>	<i>tr.ij gr.v</i>
...	
<i>Eodem[xiiij Februarij] per carnj per tucta la sumana per tuctj</i>	<i>tr.j gr.x</i>
<i>Die xxviiij Febr. per tumina j² di frumento per farj altra cosa per lu carnivalj</i>	<i>tr.j gr.x</i>
<i>Adj vij Martij per carnivalj duj peczj di formajo di rainelj</i>	<i>tr.ij gr.xv</i>
<i>Eodem lj trj Jornj dilo Carnivalj per Carnj vino et caulj</i>	<i>tr.iiij</i>

In 1520 Easter day came on 8th April⁽⁸⁾ so that Ash Wednesday fell on 29th February and *li trj Jornj di Carnivalj*, would have been 26th-28th February. The entry *carnj... per lo principio di carnivalj*, coming as it does on 30th January and a full four weeks before Carnival-time proper, is rather surprising and suggests an extended period of pre-lenten relaxation. In fact, longer Carnivals, such as the Carnevalone of Milan, are not unknown elsewhere.⁽⁹⁾

The *altra cosa per lu carnivalj* requiring one and a half *tumina* of wheat is in fact specifically stated to consist of *lasagnj* in the records of 1519, on which occasion the hospital inmates also had *duj peczi di formagij, carnj di vitella* and *vino per lu carnivalj*.⁽¹⁰⁾

With the coming of the knights the situation changed very little at Santo Spirito, certainly as far as the celebration of Carnival was concerned. The menu, and what it cost the procurators, is known for most years between 1540 and 1562, differing very slightly from year to year but invariably including some form of *carnj per lu carnivalj* and in 1562 they also had *micharuni* (mqarrun) made from *frumentu*.⁽¹¹⁾

The recurrence of meat (*carni*) on the carnival menu is only to be expected. The original meaning of carnival was a period of festivity and merrymaking immediately preceding the onset of lenten austerity, of fasting and abstinence from meat. The very etymology of the word from *carnem levare* for the first day of lent conveys this significance in a nutshell.⁽¹²⁾ The archaic Maltese Semitic word *rfugh* for its romance

8. D. DuCange, *Glossarium Mediae et Infimae Latinitatis* (Niort, 1883) Vol. I p. 283.
9. V. Gleijeses: In Rome, carnival of 1467 started on 2 February (Candlemas) (p.30); in Naples, carnival starts on 17 January (St. Anthony Abbot's Day)(p.153); and in Venice on 26 December (St. Stephen's Day)(p.127). *Enciclopedia Italiana* (Rome, 1949): In Milan, the Ambrosian Rite lent starts on the first Sunday of Lent, so that carnival is extended by another four days, called *carnevalone*.
10. MCM, ACM Misc.438 No.2 (4-14.ii.1519)f.6^v.
11. MCM, ACM Misc.440 (26.ii.1540) f.11^v,(??.1541) f.14,(??.1543) f.17^v,(?.ii.1544) f.33^v,(?.ii.1547) f.48,(18.ii.1560) f.91^v,(12.ii.1561) f.106,(31.i.1562) f.135. *Ibid.* Misc.438 No.4 (23.ii.1554) f.12.
12. V.Glejeses, 27, and *Enciclopedia Italiana*. Consciousness of this meaning of carnival is evident in a Maltese document of 1482 where use is made of the form *carnilivari*, perhaps a case of hypercorrection: "*Magnificus Dominus Capitaneus laudat chi de Incontinentj si hagianu di havirj quistj dinarij... ad Imprustu fina a CARNILUVALJ* (sic) *et mutantur cum primo et nihilus fit taxa...fina a carnivalj* (sic)" (NLM Univ. (18.xi.1482) f. 518^r).

equivalent *karnival* seems to convey the same connotation of abstinence as *carne[m] levare* and *carnis privii*; the word is listed by most eighteenth century lexicographers including the anonymous author of the recently rediscovered *Regole per la Lingua Maltese* (Biblioteca Vallicelliana, Roma, P.164, ff.29^v,172).

The increased demand for meat during carnival-time, which naturally brought with it an amount of profiteering on the part of meat-vendors, called for the intervention of the civil authorities to curb such abuses. Already in 1468 a decree, announced by the town-crier, warned that during carnival-time the prices of meat were to remain as regulated by the usual official tariff (Document 1). *Tempora mutantur*. By 1481, meat-vendors were allowed by the same council to sell all kinds of meat in the two ferial days of carnival at the best available prices, provided the interests of the council itself were safeguarded and the usual tax of *duj dinarj lu rotulu* remain in force (Document 2). There was further relaxation on the sale of meat at carnival by 1538 (Document 3).

Carnival was an important date in both the civil and the ecclesiastical calendars. Like certain religious feasts, such as Martinmas, Michaelmas and others, which were convenient time reference points for an illiterate society, so also was carnival. Thus on 18th November 1482, during a debate in the town council on the levying of a tax for the payment of some arms, his Excellency the Captain of the City expressed the opinion that no immediate taxation should be enforced until the following carnival.⁽¹³⁾ Carnival was considered at par with other religious feasts, as can be deduced from the Santo Spirito documents quoted. This is confirmed by the rather unusual custom prevalent at the time to use Carnivali as a Christian name! It is particularly illuminating to note that such names occur very early on in the fifteenth century, indicating that carnival celebrations must also have been popular then. In the Militia List of 1419-20, no less than four males, three of them from Naxxar, were called Carnivali.⁽¹⁴⁾ Nor did the custom die out then. The name was still to be found in 1483⁽¹⁵⁾ and as late as 1546.⁽¹⁶⁾

It follows therefore that carnival was far from being an innovation due to the knights. The personal name evidence takes it back to the early 1400s. It also appears from the other evidence presented that the way it was celebrated in those early days differed considerably from latter-day boisterous manifestations. But then perhaps it is the scantiness of the documentation that conceals other facets of carnival which may have existed. To mention just one doubt-casting instance, one recalls the carnival-time custom known as *il-qarcilla*, laudably rescued from total oblivion by Cassar Pullicino, who documents it for the first time in 1713.⁽¹⁷⁾ But does this custom know

13. *Ibidem*. Also: Arch. Not. Valletta, Not. G. Zabbara R494/1(IV) (29.x.1496) f.35: "Matheus Bertelli ...vendidit ...unum asinum pili ferranti.... cum lu pedi davanti zoppu.... Constancio Buhajar... [qui debet] ... solvere hoc modo vz. florenos quinque In festa Sancti Martini secundo venturo alios florenos quinque In festo nativitat[is] dominice secundo venturo et reliquos florenos quinque tempore CARNISPRIVII secundo venturo."

14. G. Wettinger, "The Militia-List of 1419-20", *Melita Historica*, V.2 (1969), 80-106: "Casali Naxaru: Carnivali Bertelli (f.6), Carnivali Daiona (f.6^v), M^u Carnivali Buhaiar (f.7); Casali Curmi: Carnivali Muscat (f.14^v)".

15. NLM, Univ. 11 (31.i.1483) f.526: "Carnival Seyax(?)"

16. MCM, ACM Prebende 3 (Decime Arcidecanali) (1546) ff.137^v-138: "Carnival Axac, ..., Carnival Maniun".

17. J. Cassar Pullicino, 23-24.

its origin to that date? Again, Maltese personal nomenclature seems to indicate older roots. The nickname *Joanni Vella alias carchille habitator rabbati* found as early as 1531,⁽¹⁸⁾ again suggests origins ante-dating the knights.

Document 1

NLM Univ. 13 (27.ii.1468) f.12^v.

xxvij^o februarij p^e Ind^s

Bannum Johannes Cauky serviens retulit qualiter Ipse de mandato nobilium Pauli de Biglera et Franciscj Gactj de Sguanes duorum ex nobilibus Juratis emisit et priconiczavit in plano ubi solet fieri macellum bannum puplicum et puplice quod vz nemo in tribus diebus carnichanij sequentibus nec in aliorum Ipsorum audeat nec presumat vendere carnes ultra precium mete facte et ordinate per Ipsos et consocios ac date accactapanis et secundum usum Malte et si quis contrarium presumserit facere et actemptare vz qui vendiderint diebus predictis ac aliquo Ipsorum carnes ultra precium denotatum in bandecta mete predictae quod jncurrat et Incidat Inpenam carlenorum quindecim marammatj civitatis applicandorum et solvendorum et aliorum carlenorum quindecim solvendorum et applicandorum accactapanis.

Document 2

NLM Univ. 11 (vii.1481) ff.488^v-490.

f.488^v

Jhs

Capituli et ordinacionj facti per li Nobili Jurati et consiglu di la chitatj di malta supra la cabella di la carni.

f.498^v Item li duj residuj Jorni di carnivalj poczanu vindiri la carnj di qualsivogla animali alu meglu preczu che trova et vurma ultra li meti supradicti dum modo che etiam li dicti Jorni paga la cabella zoe dui dinarj pro rotulo et non pro quillu che duna gratis.

Document 3

NLM Univ. 13 (ix.1538) ff.167^v-168.

f.167^v

Pandecta del modo si havj de Incabellarj la bucheria.

f.168

....unde comandera monsegnor R^{mo} verun che sia libero et concesso ad omni uno fari carni tri volti in lo anno vz in festo resurrectionis dominij nativitatis dominij et CARNIS PRIVIJ purché non sia rivinditurj.

18. G Wettinger, "Late Medieval Maltese Nicknames", *Journal of Maltese Studies*, 6 (1971), 34-46.