‘CARNJ PER LU CARNIVALJ’

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It is generally accepted that carnival was introduced into the Maltese Islands by the Knights of St. John. 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 leggieresse. 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.

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 and the minutes of the town-council: 1450 - 1498.

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. 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:

2. G. Bosio, Dell’Istoria della Sacra Religione et Illustissima Militia di San Giovanni Gerosolimitano, Parte Terza, (Napoli, 1684), 140.
3. V. Gleijeses, Piccola Storia Del Carnevale (Napoli, 1971).
5. National Library of Malta (NLM), Università 11 (1450-1498), Univ. 13 (1467-69) ff. 2-37.
6. MCM, ACM Misc. 438 N.1 (1494-96) passim.
7. Ibid. Misc. 438 N.2 (1520) ff. 16-16. 
Die xxx Januarij per carnj per lj habitantj per lo principio di Carnivalj

Eodem[xiiiij Februarij ] per carnj per tucta la sumana per tuctj

Die xxviiij Febr. per tumina j 2 i di frumento per farj

altra cosa per lu carnivalj

Adj vij Martij per carnivalj duj peczi di formajo di rainelj

Eodem lj trj Jornj dilo Carnivalj per Carnj vino et caulj

In 1520 Easter day came on 8th April 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 lasagni in the records of 1519, on which occasion the hospital inmates also had dui peczi di formagi, 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 (marrrun) made from frumento.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 carneum levare for the first day of lent conveys this significance in a nutshell.12 The archaic Maltese Semitic word rugh for its romance

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). Encyclopaedia 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.i.1519) f.6v.
   Ibid. Misc.438 No.4 (23.iii.1554) f.12.
12. V.Gleijeses, 27, and Encyclopaedia Italiana. Consciousness of this meaning of carnival is evident in a Maltese document of 1462 where use is made of the form carnillvairi, perhaps a case of hypercorrection: "Magnificus Dominus Capitaneus laudat chi de Incontinenti si legansi di havij quistij dignary... ad Improbatu fina a CARNILUVALJ (sic) et mutinantur cum primo et nihilus fit tuxa...fina a carnivalj (sic)" (NLM Univ. (18.x.1462) f. 518v.
equivalent *karnival* seems to convey the same connotation of abstinence as *carnem leve* and *carnis privi*; 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.29v,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 Carnvali 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 148315 and as late as 1546.16

It follows therefore that carnival was far from being an innovation due to the knigs. 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-qarcella*, 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. Nat. Valletta, Not. G. Zaibara R494/I(IV) (29.x.1496) f.35: "Matheus Bertelli ...vendidit ...unum asinum pli ferrant... cum Iu pedi davanti zoppu... Constanzio Buaha... [qui debit ] ... solvere hoc modo vz florenos quinque in festa Sancti Martini secundo venturo alios florenos quinque in festa nativitatis dominice secundo venturo et reliquos florenos quinque tempore CARNISPRIVIL secundo venturo."


15. NLM, Univ. 11 (31.1.1483) f.526: "Carnival Seyax(?)"

16. MCM, ACM Prefende 3 (Decime Arckdecanali) (1546) ff.137v,138: "Carnival Axac, ... Carnival Manjun."

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.12r.

xxvij° februrarij p° Ind°

Bannum Johannes Cauky serviens retulit qualiter Ipse de mandato nobilium Pauli de Biglera et Francisci Gact 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 carnihanciij sequentibus nec in aliorum Ipsorum audeat nec presumat vendere carnes ultra precium mete facte et ordinate per Ipos et consocios ac date accactapanis et secundum usum Malte et si quis contrarium presumerit facere et actemptare vz qui vendiderint diebus predictis ac aliquo Ipsorum carnes ultra precium denotatum in bandecta mete predicte quod incurrat et Incidat Inpenam carlenorum quindecim marammatij civitatis applicandorum et solvendorum et aliorum carlenorum quindecim solvendorum et applicandorum accactapanis.

Document 2

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

f.488v                  Ihs

Capituli et ordinacionij facti per li Nobili Jurati et consiglu di la chitaţj di malta supra la cabella di la carni.

f.498v                  Item li duj residuj Jorni di carnivalj poczanu vindiri la carnj di qualsivogla animali alu megu préczu che trova et vurra ultra li meti supradicti dum modo che etiam li dicti Jorni paga la cabella zoe duj dinarj pro rotulo et non pro quillon che duna gratis.

Document 3

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

f.167v                  Pandecta del modo si havy de Incabellarj la bucheria.

f.168                  ...unde comandera monsegnor Rmo verun che sia libero et concessio ad omni uno fari carni tri volti in lo anno vz in festo resurrectionis dominij nativitatis dominij et CARNIS PRIVIJE purche non sia rivinditur.