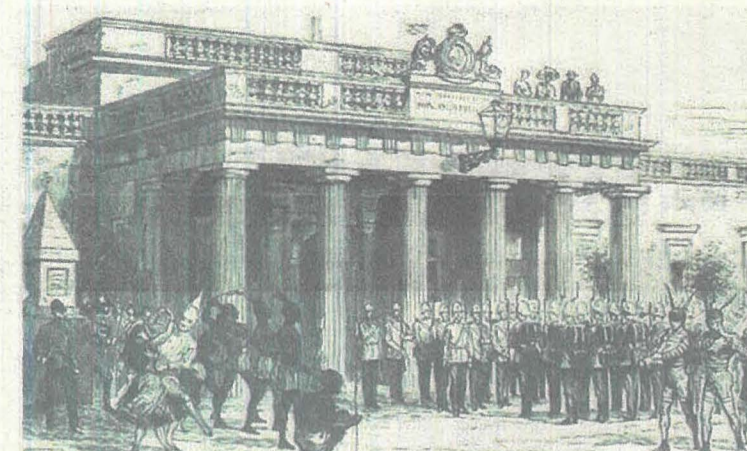




Parata



Ta Giezu Church



Grand Master Giovanni Paolo Lascaris

Six aspects of Malta's carnival



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This time of year, at least in pre Covid-19 times, Valletta usually comes to life with people in fancy dress costumes, ornate floats made from papier-mâché, loud music and an explosion of bright colours, as Malta celebrates its annual carnival

As in most countries, this popular festival is held just before the start of Lent: a sombre 40-day period of penitence in preparation for Good Friday and Easter, which in the past included obligatory fasting and abstinence, particularly from meat and other animal products. Indeed, it is believed that the name carnival originated from the Italian phrase *carne vale* or "meat is allowed", as carnival was seen as a last opportunity to eat and make merry before Lent. This is why carnival is associated with all sorts of revelries and excesses, as it becomes acceptable to behave in a way that would be unacceptable at any other time of the year.

But how much do you know about Malta's carnival?

The history of Malta's carnival

Existing archives prove that some sort of carnival was already being celebrated in Malta since at least the 15th century. Although these documents provide very little information about the celebrations involved, they do give some interesting insights: the local administration, the Mdina Università, strictly regulated the price of

meat during this period, to avoid abuses by sellers, at a time when clearly the demand increased drastically. And in the Santo Spirito hospital in Rabat, patients were provided with much better food during carnival than was the case on other days: instead of the usual fare – bread, oil and beans – patients were fed veal, cheese, pasta and wine, to reflect the special nature of the festivities.

Nonetheless, the modern form of carnival started to take shape with the arrival of the Knights of St John, who greatly strengthened already existing traditions. In 1535, as part of the carnival celebrations, the Knights held a jousting tournament in Birgu, which might have inspired the locals to enact their own carnival shenanigans. From then onwards, carnival would be celebrated by all sectors of society: the nobility would put on their finest clothes and attend masked balls, while the common folk took to the streets dressed up in home-made costumes and masks. Festivities would start on the Saturday prior to Ash Wednesday, with the reading of a *bandu* by the Grand Master and the merriment and wild revelry would last until midnight of the following Tuesday.

Already in the 16th century, the ships of the Order would be specially decorated for carnival, which could be where the tradition of the carnival floats originated from. But it was during the 18th century that the idea of the *défilé* seems to have taken root: this would be led by the Grand Master's carriage, flanked by cavalry marching to the beating of drums and followed by other decorated carriages.

Unfortunately, carnival went into a decline during the 19th century, when the British governed Malta, as it was not part of British culture, but somehow, it still managed to survive. Following the granting of the 1921 Constitution, carnival was strengthened once more, especially through the set-

ting up of a special committee tasked with its organisation, thus paving the way for the carnival we know today, with beautifully-crafted costumes, dance competitions and colourful floats led by King Carnival.

An interesting development during the 1920s and 30s was that carnival floats started to take on increasingly satirical themes, poking fun at political figures and unpopular government decisions. This led to a law being passed in 1936, banning political satire from carnival, something that was only changed in 2013. After a brief pause during World War II, carnival once more started being organised on a national scale following the end of the conflict.

The hub of the organised activities was located at St George's Square, right in the heart of the city, until 1974, but was later moved for many years to Freedom Square. The building of the new parliament led to yet more moves, until in 2014 it finally returned back to its original location. Festivities, however, are enjoyed throughout the capital, in nearby Floriana, and in various towns and villages, most notably in Nadur, Gozo.

Carnival food

Food and drink have always been important components of carnival celebrations, since the whole idea was to enjoy life as much as possible before the austerity of Lent kicked in. In fact, carnival traditions would not be complete without a number of sweets traditionally associated with this period.



Prinjolata

Of course, the most well-known is undoubtedly the *prinjolata*. This mixture of sponge cake, candied fruit, cream and chocolate, covered with meringue, fits in perfectly with the atmosphere of carnival. It gets its name from the word *prinjol* (Maltese for pine nuts), which are used both in the filling and topping. *Prinjolata* normally comes in a huge domed shape and is sold by weight. Prominently displayed in the shop windows of confectionaries, during carnival time, adds even more colour to the festivities.

Also traditionally associated with carnival are the *perlini*. These equally colourful sugar-coated almonds were, in the past, thrown to children in the crowds from the carnival floats as they went around the streets of Valletta.

The 'Parata'

Carnival celebrations always kick off with the traditional dance known as *il-parata* and this is one of those customs that was introduced by the Knights, which has survived to this day.

Traditionally, it was customary for people, as well as groups of dancers, to gather at St George's Square in front of the Grand Master's Palace, to wait for the reading of the *bandu* from the palace balcony, granting permission for the start of the celebrations. As soon as this was done, the groups of dancers, dressed as knights and ottomans, would perform a mock fight, re-enacting the Great Siege of 1565, in honour of that very famous and important victory.

This tradition was taken extremely seriously during the Order's rule and the Maltese eagerly awaited its performance, because it signalled the start of the wild celebrations. Centuries later, *il-parata* still ushers in every edition of carnival, even though its participants are now mainly children.

'Il-Kukkanja'

Another centuries-old tradition

linked to carnival in Malta is that of the *kukkanja*. Based on a Neapolitan tradition, this game was brought to Malta by the Italian Grand Master Marc'Antonio Zondadari in 1721.

The *kukkanja* involved a greased pole, at the top of which foodstuffs would be tied. Competitors would attempt to climb to the top and claim these prizes, a feat that was both difficult and amusing to watch. Contemporary descriptions explain how crowds used to assemble at St George's Square and at a given signal, they would attack the hams, sausages and even live animals dangling from the top. Guards had to be placed on the square to keep some semblance of order; both during the event and also in the preceding days to make sure that nothing was stolen.

The annual event came to an end when the Knights left Malta, but the tradition was brought back to life in the 20th century and is still occasionally held in modern times. Interestingly, during repaving works in St George's Square some years ago, an old stone block with a circular hole in it was discovered and it is believed to be the same one that was originally used to hold the *kukkanja* pole in place.

Carnival killjoys

Despite carnival being traditionally seen as a period of wild revelry and excessive behaviour, there were those who tried to control it or even ban it altogether, even though it usually did not go down well with the public, and often prompted repercussions.

Several grand masters enforced specific rules which had to be adhered to, often under pain of severe punishment, such as public flogging or condemnation to rowing on the Order's galleys. Masked revellers were forbidden from carrying items that could be used as weapons and the wearing of masks was not allowed after dark. Women were forbidden from wearing revealing costumes and slaves were banned from wearing costumes altogether.

In 1535, the Italian Grand Master Piero del Ponte was greatly displeased by some of the knights, who he claimed had exaggerated in their behaviour and made it clear that he would no longer tolerate any wild excesses, especially since they were members of a religious community. Grand Master Jean de Valette also felt he had to reprimand his knights for going overboard with their festivities.

The worst incident came in

1639, when Grand Master Giovanni Paolo Lascaris prohibited women from wearing masks and participating in balls organised by the knights. The latter blamed this on the Grand Master's Jesuit advisor, a certain Father Cassia, and a number of them decided to make fun of the Jesuits. Lascaris was furious and had one of the ringleaders arrested, but a group of his fellow knights not only freed him, but also ransacked the Jesuit college in revenge and demanded the expulsion of the religious order from Malta, forcing Lascaris to accede to their demand in an effort to defuse the situation. To this day, the Maltese saying *wiċċ Laskri* is used to describe a person who is considered to be a party pooper.

A similar incident took place in 1846, when the British Governor Sir Patrick Stuart, decided to suspend carnival activities on the Sunday, as he thought it was scandalous to display such unruly behaviour on the Lord's day. The disgruntled locals decided to spite him by dressing up their horses, donkeys and other animals instead, and to parade them through Valletta. The incident increased the already strained relationship between the British Protestants and Maltese Catholics, especially when a mob attacked a unit of British soldiers parading in front of the Main Guard. Although luckily there was no bloodshed, many were arrested and some were imprisoned.

Eventually re-instituted some years later.

An even greater tragedy took place on 11 February 1823, during an event held for boys from the Valletta and Cottonera areas. It had become customary to organise a mass for them in Floriana, followed by a procession to the Ta' Giezu convent in Valletta, where the children would be offered bread and fruit. The aim was to keep them away from the rowdy carnival behaviour, but unfortunately on this occasion, mass finished much later than intended and the children's procession to Valletta coincided exactly with the end of the carnival festivities.

A considerable number of adults, intent on getting some free food for themselves, mixed in with the boys as they entered the convent through the vestry and walked through a corridor leading to an exit on St Ursula Street, where the bread was being handed out.

When everyone had entered the corridor, the door was closed behind them to stop those who had already been given food from going back in for a second helping. As pushing and shoving broke out in the overcrowded corridor, a lamp was knocked over and in the pitch black that ensued, panic broke out. Those at the front fell down some steps, blocking the exit, and in the resulting stampede, 110 boys were trampled to death. A subsequent investigation would conclude that a succession of errors had led to this tragedy.

Coming back to 2021, carnival will also be very different from usual due to the current pandemic, being in fact officially cancelled for the first time since World War II. It is however hoped that come next year, this annual event which so many, young and old, look forward to, will once again provide us all with the opportunity to let our hair down, have fun, and celebrate together.

Carnival tragedies

Unfortunately, carnival has not always been a time of cheer and rejoicing. During carnival of 1763, the hungry and impatient crowd assaulted the *kukkanja* before the signal to commence had been given. The soldiers guarding it used force to hold the mob back, which led to 17 people being killed on the spot, while another 37 died later as a result of injuries they had sustained. This tragic incident led to the *kukkanja* being banned from subsequent carnivals for a while, although it was