

## Fasching in München

## Foolsplay? A Brief History of Fasching, Lent, and Ash Wednesday

Germany has, so the saying goes, five seasons – Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter – and another season sandwiched between Winter and Spring alternately called Fasting, Fasnacht, or Karneval. This season begins some time after 11 November and culminates and ends on Faschingsdienstag, the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday. This year, Faschingsdienstag, the highpoint of the season will be Tuesday, 28 February 2006, a holiday for many Germans. Especially in the predominantly Catholic areas of Germany, in the towns and cities along the Rhine, in much of Bavaria, and in parts of Austria, schools, banks, and most businesses will be closed, a Faschingsprinze takes over the reigns of government, and all “normal” activity comes to a standstill. Between Sunday and Tuesday, parades with floats mocking everyone and everything will wind their way through the streets of the cities, children and grown-ups will dress up in fancy costumes and the guesthouses and dancehalls will be filled with revelers. In all this revelry, dancing and merrymaking leading up to Faschingsdienstag, the origins of this merrymaking are easily forgotten.

Let us begin by looking at the terms used to denote this season – where do they come from and what do they mean? Fasching – a term used mostly in Austria, Bavaria, and Thuringia – is derived from the Middle High German term *Vaschanc*, or *vastschang*, from the German *fasten* and *(aus-)schenken*, to dispense alcoholic drink. Here it denotes the last drink served before the beginning of the Lenten Fast. The term *Fast-*

*nacht* and its regional variations of *Fasnacht*, *Fasnet*, *Fassenacht*, *Fosnet*, or *Faasend* are primarily used in Hesse and along the Rhine, in the Palatinate, Baden, Swabia, and Switzerland. It is derived from Old High German *fasta*, the time of fasting, and *naht*, meaning “night” or “the evening before.” Initially, *Fastnacht* therefore denoted only the day before the beginning of Lent.

Fasching or *Fastnacht*, as is apparent from the etymology of the terms, has one of its roots in the church year and its timing is tied to the Easter date, the Sunday after the first full moon following the vernal equinox. However, the cultural origins of Fasching – and the need to end it somehow – go much deeper. Fasching is a prime example of the conscious appropriation of pre-Christian traditions and their integration into the Christian calendar. The Romans had taken advantage of the fact that the New Year began on 1 March to make the weeks between the middle of December, the date of the Saturnalia in honor of Saturnus, and the Bacchanalia in honor of their god Bacchus, to early March a period of celebration. Just like the date of the Saturnalia around 25 December, as part of the celebration of the Winter solstice became our date for Christmas, the fertility rites connected with the driving out of winter and the re-birth of the sun on the solstice stand at the root of the revelry of carnival.

Dancing, processions, and the wearing of masks either because of the need to scare evil spirits away or driven by the desire to be someone else, to assume the role of some entity

or a person more powerful than oneself, is a desire as old as mankind itself. As such, Fasching stands at the root of the Saturnalia, when the relationship between rulers and ruled, masters and slaves, men and women, was reversed. The usual order of society was temporarily suspended as men dressed as women and masters waited on their slaves. As the commonwealth was ruled by an elected regent, the forerunner of Prince Carnival, the Faschingsprinze, communities seemed full of fools. This is why some etymologists derive the term Karneval from the Latin *carrus navalis*, the ship of fools. As such, *Fastnacht* and its precursors served as a safety valve to help defuse real or potential tensions in society. Others put forth an alternative explanation for the term Karneval, which is popular especially in the cities along the Rhine such as Cologne or Düsseldorf. This explanation places the origins of Karneval in the Medieval Latin *carnelevale* or *carnelevare*, meaning the “taking away of meat,” integrating it into the cultural context of *Fastnacht* or Fasching. Along the same lines goes the explanation of the term from Latin *carnevale* – Farewell Meat! Either way, the term Karneval as such is first known to have been used in German-speaking Europe in 1699, centuries after *Fasnacht*, the time before the Forty-day Fast before Easter. However, there are more than forty days before Easter.

Forty days before Easter, however, gets you to the Tuesday before the sixth Sunday before Easter. This is the Sunday called *Invocavit* in the church calendar but was known as *Funkensonntag*, the “Sunday of Sparks” by