

Fasching in München

the peasantry. Originally the Monday after that Sunday was Fastnacht – the night before the beginning of Lent on Tuesday. In 1091, the Church decided to exclude all Sundays from the Lenten Fast, but in order to still have a Forty-day Fast, the Church also pushed the beginnings of Lent back by six days to the Wednesday that had heretofore preceded the Fastnacht. In order to enforce a verifiable compliance with the new order of Lent, the Church also decreed that on that Wednesday all people, clerics as well as laymen, should receive an ashen mark on their foreheads – thus Ash Wednesday.

Traditions die hard, however, and many of the peasants continued to celebrate the beginning of Lent on the traditional day, leading to two dates and the divergent use of the terms to denote the event, especially in the Alpine region. While the nobility and Church had their Fastnacht, the peasantry had their Fasching. The Herrenfastnacht or Grosse Fastnacht was observed by the authorities on the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday and the Bauernfasching of the peasantry, sometimes derisively called Pfaffenfastnacht to indicate that it was celebrated by the ecclesiastical authorities, six days later on the Monday after the Sunday after “Invocavit.” Despite all attempts by the authorities to eradicate the “old” Fastnacht, it is even today observed in parts of Switzerland and in Baden. One expression of this clinging to, and the survival of, this “old” Fastnacht is the “Funkensonntag,” the ceremonial burning of the Fastnacht on Invocavit. Once a visible expression of the end of Fastnacht, a burning of the spirit of Fastnacht, its continued existence also in parts of Eastern France, Luxemburg, Switzerland, the Vorarlberg, and the Tyrol, is also an expression of peasant resistance to ecclesiastical authority.

Having been forced to accept the existence of a Fastnacht, the Church

tried valiantly but unsuccessfully to eradicate the pagan manifestations of the customs, which not only had survived into the Middle Ages but, since the thirteenth century, further and further expanded into the weeks before Ash Wednesday. Accepting the inevitable, the church eventually designated the weeks from 6 January, the Feast Day of the Three Wise Men at the end of the Twelve Nights of Christmas, to Ash Wednesday as the season of carnival.

First used in the twelfth century already – Wofram von Eschenbach uses the term in his Parzival – Fastnacht became such an integral component of the year that it was even used to identify dates on documents. In 1295, a decree by the Duke of Bavaria ordering the reconstruction of a mint in Munich is dated on the “sonntag vor Vasnacht.” Other documents in City archives such as the Council Minutes of 1319 show that, by then, the Fastnacht in and around Munich was not only an occasion for merrymaking, eating and drinking and dancing in the streets but a popular date for marriage as well. Not even warfare could stop that merrymaking. Though Munich was under siege in 1403, the people are recorded to have danced in the market square before City Hall. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw growing strife in the cities of Central Europe between the poor and the established elites. Munich was not exempt from these troubles and the City Fathers there and elsewhere used Fasching as a safety valve for these tensions. In 1397, there had been an open revolt in the city that was suppressed by authorities. Part of the reconciliation process was the offer by the authorities to the populace on Fasching, in 1403, to come out of their homes to dance and celebrate in the streets.

Some of the people of Munich may not have trusted their authorities and it is during that time period that, dur-

ing Fasching, the lower classes were allowed to wear costumes and masks. This right was officially acknowledged in 1459 by the city council. The purpose of these masks, however, was now only indirectly connected with the pagan traditions of scaring away evil spirits but rather it was to mimic the aristocracy and the heads of church and state without fear of retribution. A similar event occurred in Nuremberg that has since become an integral component of Fasching in the city. The Nürnberger Schembartlaufen is a parade of bearded masks, the Schönbärte or “Beautiful Beards” organized by the journeymen and masters, notably the butchers. It has its origins in an insurrection of local craftsmen, in 1348 and 1349, who rebelled against the town’s ruling families. The butchers had not joined the rebellion and granted the right to wear masks, perform a special dance, engage in fencing matches, and to parade through town during the Fastnacht. The early years of this tradition from 1430 to 1540 are recorded in the Schembartbücher which show the various costumes worn, street scenes with dancers, and the float with its central theme. The nobility too adopted the revelry of Fasching; the tournaments and costume balls under Emperor Maximilian around 1500 were especially renowned for their lavishness.

Many, but not all, towns have parades during either or all of the three days before Ash Wednesday. The most notable exception is Vienna, where Emperor Leopold I prohibited the dancing in the streets and the wearing of masks during Fasching after the Siege of Vienna by the Turks in 1683. He did this primarily to maintain law and order in the city, but he could not end the conviviality. The Viennese simply moved inside, into taverns, theaters, and the palaces of the nobility. Out of this prohibition arose the tradition of the Viennese balls, which still form the cornerstone