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# HELVETIA

Magazine for the members of the Swiss Society of New Zealand Inc  
Helvetia is in its 74th year

February 2008

## Fasnacht in Switzerland - Morgestraich in Basel

Fasnacht in Basel is one of the country's best known and most extravagant traditions. When the carnival gets underway in the early hours of the morning (the Morgestraich) the streets of this northern Swiss city come alive



with the sound of drumming, flute-playing and marching by masked and costumed figures.

### Lötschental mask

The Lötschental in Canton Valais is famous for the Tschäggättä tradition, which takes place in February. Young unmarried men and boys roam the streets of the villages of the valley, wearing demonic masks and tunics made of sheep or goat skins, and ringing bells. The name refers to the black and white colour of these tunics: "tschäggättä" means "piebald" in the local dialect. By tradition the Tschäggättä wear gloves smeared with soot, and take the occasional swipe at anyone they meet (particularly young women). The masks are handcarved, and each one is different. They normally feature crooked teeth and bulging, uneven eyes. It is said that they reflect the untamed nature of the valley. They have also been inter-

The Morgestraich traditionally starts on the Monday after Ash Wednesday, at 4 am precisely. Although the Fasnacht tradition can be traced back to the 14th century, the Morgestraich was first given official approval in 1835. Participants would march through the city with torches and now with lanterns. Today, all street lighting is turned off in the city during the Morgestraich, to make way for the procession of large decorative lanterns.

The day continues much in the same vein, with music, processions, and plenty of noise. In addition, some cafés and restaurants provide a forum for the Schnitzelbank tradition: participants get up and spout satirical verses about a subject of their choice.

preted as an expression of anarchy and rebellion in a peasant society that was largely dominated by the church.



Like this tradition, many of the costumes worn at the carnival reflect current affairs and events.

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