

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 77 (2011)
Heft: [2]

Artikel: Old carnival traditions die hard
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-943338>

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Old carnival traditions die hard

The Basel Fasnacht starts at precisely 4am on the Monday after Ash Wednesday each year and lasts for exactly 72 hours.

At 4am on Monday, the normally sober, commercial city of Basel becomes a riot of colour, noise and exuberance as people start to celebrate Fasnacht.

The festival is an anomaly as in most Protestant areas Fasnacht, or carnival, is not usually celebrated. Its survival is a testament to Basel residents' stubbornness and deep affection for the event - and to human nature.



Guggenmusik

During Morgenstraich, the opening event, the lights are turned off and lanterns are used - large parade lanterns and head-mounted smaller ones and with the order "Achtung! Morgestraich - vorwärts marsch!" the festivities begin.

For three days ending on Wednesday Basel's old town is full to bursting with thousands of carnival participants marching, playing music or telling jokes.

Basel is normally a serious city. It's a city of commerce and trade and people don't always have lots to smile about.

"On these three days you can certainly let off steam, although visitors from outside who know other Fasnachts are usually astounded how deadly serious Fasnacht is here," said Dominik Wunderlin, curator at Basel's Museum of Cultures, Switzerland's largest ethnological museum with a permanent exhibition on

the event.

Basel's carnival is rich in tradition. Fife-players and drummers form so-called Cliques, which join up in procession. They march in time, revealing the military influences of times gone by.

This is rather different to celebrations in other parts of Switzerland, or in other countries, where participants tend to run a little more riot.

Joining the Cliques are the Guggenmusik players, whose cacophonous sound has been described as "a cross between a big band and noise machine".

Wild and wonderful costumes abound. And masks, or Larve as they are known in Basel - often depicting grotesque figures - are absolutely compulsory.



Waggis

"If you understand the Basel humour and dialect you will see that people enjoy life at Basel Fasnacht and that people poke fun at the events of the past year," said Wunderlin.

This is done through a choice of "sujet" or theme. Past victims have included, for example, former United States president George W Bush as well as hapless cabinet ministers.

Sujets can be seen on procession lanterns or in costumes. Schnitzelbänke singers are known for their satirical verses - and many of these are particularly pointed, as Baslers are famous for their biting wit.

That the city is home to Switzerland's largest Fasnacht is perhaps surprising, given that Basel is Protestant. Carnival, which is

supposed to end on Ash Wednesday, is normally celebrated in Catholic areas as a pre-Lent party. Lucerne's Fasnacht is among the most well known in Switzerland.

The Catholic carnival date was rescheduled by six days by a church council in the 11th century after Sundays were excluded from the 40-day fasting period before Easter.

From then until the 16th century there were two dates. The one ending on Ash Wednesday was generally observed by the upper echelons of society. The second, later one - which survives in Basel - was known as the farmers' carnival.

It is not clear how Basel's Fasnacht managed to survive the Reformation. Indeed the authorities tried to forbid carnival in 1546, arguing that as Protestants had abolished the fasting period, pre-Lent exuberance was no longer needed.

The celebration managed to survive, but it was not always popular.

Until the end of the 18th century there were many negative testimonials in the court files showing that people didn't necessarily like it when others went out into the streets during Fasnacht, making noise at night and running around in costumes. This was frowned upon and was actually forbidden, but people always broke the rules.

Masks on display at the exhibition, beautifully made by Basel artists, attest to influences that pre-date the Reformation.

The true origin of Fasnacht, however - the Lent component may have come later - remains lost in the mists of time. But motivations for celebrating it may not have changed.

Traditional culinary delights include: Mehlsuppe and Käse- or Zwiebelwähe (flour soup and cheese or onion quiche).

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