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Autor: Latham-Zurbruegg, Tanja
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Chalandamarz – a tradition to chase winter away



Chalandamarz is an ancient tradition and festival that is celebrated by the Romansh speaking part of the Swiss Canton Graubünden.

Every year it is celebrated on the 1st of March (Chalandamarz means “first day” in old Romansh). Chalandamarz dates back to the time when southeast Switzerland, or Retia, was part of the Roman Empire. This was in a time before Christianity and some historical records state that this ancient festival may be even older than the Roman Empire itself. Today Chalandamarz is still celebrated in the Engadin valley, the Val Müstair, Oberhalbstein valley and Albula valley.

Chalandamarz is a pagan festival that marks the beginning of a new year of life and is celebrated at the beginning of spring. The purpose of Chalandamarz is to scare away the evil spirits of winter and wake up the good spirits of spring. The evil spirits are chased away through noise, coming from large cowbells, singing and the cracking of whips. On the 1st of March boys from each village form a procession, ringing bells and singing. Traditionally girls do not participate, but in some villages they carry baskets gathering money while simultaneously also carrying bells. Often the boys march around village fountains and go into old houses (with presumably great acoustics) and sing. As if all that noise is not enough, it is often followed by the cracking of whips. In the evening on the first of March, there is usually a party with dancing. There is a procession

of boys at Chalandamarz which is led by the oldest boys – those who are due to leave school the following year. These are known as Patruns (meaning “masters” in Romansh).

Bells and whips are commonly used at Chalandamarz. There are many different types, and they are organized into the following families:

Talacs: are small bells and the only ones which are still worn by cows in the Engadin (most of the others are too heavy).

Plumpas: are some of the largest bells, often made of bronze or brass to provide good sound.

Maruns: are round bells made of a thin layer of steel. They are often black in colour. These are the largest bells in Chalandamarz, measuring up to half a metre in diameter.

Brunzinas: have a more widely recognized shape. They are often brass and make a unique sound. These are the most common bells worn by girls who participate in Chalandamarz.

Zampuogns: are not as eccentric as brunzinas but nonetheless they are uniquely different from other bells. From the outside they are very smooth, made

of bronze and brass and can easily crack. Their ringer is very thick and it often produces a low but clear sound. They are heavier than regular plumpas.

Rolls: are large belts with rows of small bells attached to them. They are often worn by the oldest boys, the oldest Patruns. Rolls are also worn by horses. Some villages still retain the tradition of using horses to pull the boys to smaller villages on the outskirts of the main town.

Whips: are another noise making device with a sound quite unlike bells. They produce deafening cracks to scare the spirits of winter away. Some people think that the sound is caused by the whip striking the ground, but it is actually caused by air rushing around a small piece of string at the end of the whip. Whips are often carried by Patruns during the Chalandamarz procession and many of the boys use these whips to pretend to hit the younger boys – joking of course.

By Tanja Latham-Zurbruegg

